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Esther in Diaspora

Toward an Alternative Interpretive Framework

By

Tsaurayi Kudakwashe Mapfeka

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To the Esthers in my life ...

Maud Maswereni, my mother (MHSRIP)
Annette Grace, my wife
Natasha and Tanya, my daughters

... may your call to serving God and His people be accomplished without exploitation of any kind

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There was a Jewish man in Shushan the citadel and his name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish a Benjaminite who had been exiled from Jerusalem among the captives exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled.

ESTHER 2:5–6

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typographical errors gave us so much laughter but without her sharp eye this work would have been difficult to read. I am also indebted to Mrs Petra Siegers who not only proofread some sections of the monograph but also held my hand in working through my German. I am grateful to God for my friend and wife Annette Grace for the unwavering support and for your belief in me. I am blessed to have two wonderful daughters, Natasha and Tanya, always inspirational and steadfast in their love of my person. To Munya I can only say many thanks for your collected response to my bursting into your life. I owe a word of appreciation to my brother Washington and his wife Janet Mapfeka and family, nephew Nyasha Enoch and his wife Nomsa Mapfeka and family, Tsitsi and her husband Fred Zinyemba and the entire Mapfeka family for coming through for me each time I cried out for help.

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As stated above, the monograph I present has benefited from a wide communal effort; many share in any good it reflects. However, I take full responsibility for any errors and shortcomings.

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Introduction

The aim of the present work is to explore a theory-nuanced understanding of diaspora as *the* heuristic nexus for reading the book of Esther. Put differently, central to the methodology employed in this study is a postcolonial theory of diaspora.[1] With the plot of the story set in the context of the postexilic eastern diaspora, including the word 'diaspora' in topics for articles and monographs on Esther has become commonplace, especially in the last fifty years as the term has morphed into a buzzword.[2] Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah lists diasporic hermeneutics as one of the conspicuous tenets defining the morphing template of the voices from the margins, with an unsettling effect on Western hegemony by addressing the concerns of the 'other'.[3] Sugirtharajah sums up the contribution of diaspora hermeneutics in this manner:

> One of the questions that diasporic hermeneutics has forced us to face is, who are the authentic representatives, the ones who stayed behind at home or those who left to find new homes elsewhere? … What diasporic hermeneutics has done is to make regional-based hermeneutics such as African, Asian, or Latin American almost redundant. Does geographical location provide the parameters for their theology, or can one frame and shape geographically inflected theologies far-removed from the safety of their territorial confines?[4]

The inherent contentious relationship between the poles framed as the centre/Western on the one hand and the margins/'other' on the other hand had already found expression in the foundational work of Edward W. Said who argued for an understanding of orientalism as a creation of the West. Said challenged his reader to: '… consider how the Orient, in particular the Near Orient became known in the West as its great complementary opposite since antiquity.'[5] Put differently, the Orient became, for the West, 'the other',

1 Admittedly, the academic exploration of diaspora is a fairly new field of academic enquiry and as such theoretical framing is only in its early stages and is used in this work advisedly.

2 I will refer to Roger Brubaker when he uses an internet-based tool to show the steady increase of hits and use of the word 'diaspora' in the academic discourse. R. Brubaker, 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (1), 2005, 1–19, 1.

3 R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Introduction: Still in the Margins' in R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* Revised and Expanded Third Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 5.

4 R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Introduction: Still in the Margins', 6.

5 E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 58. First published in 1978.

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often inferior in all respects and representing every imaginable evil the West was not.

This study will not anchor the kind of diaspora reading it proposes in the dichotomy of the West and the rest of the world as the 'other', but proceeds from noticing that reference to diaspora in reading Esther often amounts to nothing more than a mere recognition of the narrative location, which is clearly away from Eretz Israel.[6] Sometimes there is an attempt to distinguish exile from subsequent situation of diaspora, referring to scenarios where exilic communities resign themselves to the permanence of their situation.[7] Even this, however, is not adequately nuanced. This study will show that the term diaspora belongs to a distinct epistemological category and needs to be understood as distinct from exile or any other form of migration. It is that nuanced understanding of diaspora that I wish to place at the centre of reading the book and story of Esther.

The connection between the story of Esther and the Jewish Purim festival has remained for many the central interpretive key to reading Esther. Adele Berlin aptly underlines the link between the book and the Purim festival when she avers:

> If we did not have Purim, with the reading of *Megillat* Esther as its centrepiece, Esther would languish in obscurity. In fact, it seems likely that Esther was included in the Bible because of the celebration of Purim.[8]

This is a position that has informed reading Esther studies for more than a century. Berlin's remark cited here seems to be a mere variation of Samuel Rolles Driver's statement more than a century ago: 'The aim of the Book of Esther is manifest: it is to explain the origin of the feast of Purim, and to suggest motives for its observance.'[9] I take as given the connection between Esther and Purim, particularly in relation to the book's reception history and its continued use in liturgical contexts. What this study sets out to challenge is the use of that connection as *the* interpretive key for reading the book, offering instead a theory-nuanced concept of diaspora as a more viable option.

One key feature of this study is its analogical use of the Zimbabwe 'diaspora' community in the United Kingdom to glean insights with which to study the

6 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora' in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (1) (2010), 25–53, 28.

7 J. D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 15–16.

8 A. Berlin, *Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), ix.

9 S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* 9th ed., (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), 481.

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community behind Esther. Without the use of analogical reasoning (which will be given considerable attention in Chapter 5), the community behind Esther would remain a chimera and the central concern of this study to place the phenomenon of diaspora at the centre of reading Esther would be difficult to sustain. The concept of diaspora is loaded with several presuppositions. In the first instance, the term implies the memory of a centre – a homeland – from which a huge portion of an entire religious and/or ethnic group or a significant portion of the group at the very least is dispersed to two or more destinations.[10] Second, the harsh conditions associated with life as the minority and 'the other' in destination communities – the host lands – sharpens the sting of the horror associated with diaspora. While these are matters I will pay attention to in this study, I must emphasise at this point that application of a diaspora reading to Esther rests upon the insight that both the story and the book of Esther found expression within some sort of a community that had these presuppositions as part of their self-understanding. It has been well argued already that biblical narratives, as is true of most literary legacies of antiquity and beyond, reflect more of the communities that produced them than those they purport to be about.[11] Roger Norman Whybray reiterates the same point when he states:

> Since the end of the eighteenth century it has been increasingly recognised that all literature is to a large extent a reflection of the period in which it is written, and has been influenced by the circumstances in which the authors lived.[12]

Where Esther is concerned, the producing community cannot be identified with any certainty. This study uses the Zimbabwean community in the United Kingdom as a modern-day analogy from which to glean insights such as would assist in understanding that not-so-easy-to-reach community behind Esther.

1 The Problems with Esther

I will need to attend to several challenges that concern reading Esther and delineate in clear terms what Esther really entails for this study. The story of

10 In the event of a single destination for deportees/migrants/exiles, the notion of dispersion would not apply and, thus, the label 'diaspora' would be difficult to sustain.

11 As early as 1878, Julius Welhausen made this observation, see J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* trans. J. Sutherland Black and A. Menzies (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885), 318–319.

12 R. N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 2.

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Esther, like any other portion of the Hebrew Bible with a long oral prehistory,[13] was told with notable variations that probably relate to telling the story in different places and times. What stands out as distinctive with Esther is that several extant versions with remarkable differences have survived to this day. However, it is not unusual to hear such remarks as 'Esther is written in simple Hebrew'[14] or that Esther can be described as 'Godless Scripture'.[15] Such remarks are accurate when considering just one version that has survived. The availability of a multiplicity of extant versions, as Lewis B. Paton noted more than a century ago,[16] implies that descriptive statements such as these require qualification of some sort. For example, the B Text of Esther, an extant version descending in the Greek tradition, until editorial changes caused by the Reformation,[17] included several portions wherein God was as active in the story as is typical of the rest of the Hebrew Bible. The same bears no traceable evidence linking it to an identifiable Hebrew textual ancestry. This study will include a detailed discussion of the versions and the rationale for electing the Masoretic Text (MT) version of Esther as the focus of this enquiry. However, let it suffice at this point to state that I will distinguish carefully between 'the story of Esther' as told in the various versions and 'the book of Esther,' which I will use to refer to the MT version of Esther.

13 Here I am working from the perspective of the tradition history approach in which biblical texts are generally perceived as products of a long and complex process of composition as is aptly summed up by Douglas Knight when he says, 'the literature of the Bible or at least large portions of it came gradually into existence through a process, passed down from one generation to another acquiring their final form with assistance and contributions of many individuals and groups along the way.' D. A. Knight, 'Tradition History', in D. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 6), 633–638 (London: Doubleday, 1973), 633.

14 L. M. Day, *Esther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 3.

15 J. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 21–27.

16 L. B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther.* ICC Series. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 5.

17 In the argument for '*Sola Scriptura*' (by Scripture alone), the Reformers argued for the supreme authority of Scripture in all matters of doctrine and practice. The argument extended to limit understanding of 'scripture' to canonical texts deemed faithful to original texts. Where Esther is concerned, having taken the Hebrew version available (the MT version of Esther) as original for two main reasons (it was written in Hebrew and it was the one included in the Hebrew Bible), the Reformers insisted on its primacy. While some official ecclesiastical sections have continued to use the Greek B text found in the Septuagint, some have taken the six portions out of the main text to the apocryphal collection as 'Additions to Esther', needless to say, where they make no narrative sense on their own.

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2 The Problem with Purim

Given that the word פור and its cognates appear in the Hebrew Bible fewer that ten times, with all of these appearances found exclusively in the book of Esther, it is easy to understand how a close connection has been made between the book and the Jewish festival of Purim. As already noted above, the dominant view in Esther studies is that the story is a work of fiction that came into being as an aetiology to explain the origins of the Purim festival. This project is borne out of a suspicion of the adequacy of such a reading. As will be argued in greater detail in the body of the thesis below, the Hebrew root פור is used in the MT version of Esther only eight times in more than 250 verses, with the larger portion of that usage being related to the institution of the festival.[18] It is my considered opinion that for a matter widely presumed central to reading the story, that infrequent usage provides sufficient grounds for searching for an alternative heuristic key. Comparable are the connections between 'Passover' and the book of Exodus and that of שבועות (Shavout) and the book of Ruth. However this study notes that unlike in the other cases, the connection between פור and the book of Esther has become central to reading the book. It is important that I acknowledge and locate the connection between the story of Esther and Purim festival, which has been sealed in the history of the reception of both the story and the book. I will show that the connection is closely related to the canonical book's liturgical use in subsequent Jewish traditions but heuristic key for reading the book is not in that connection. For that purpose, I am proposing a theory-nuanced concept of diaspora.

3 The Problem with Genealogy

I shall make a case for the diaspora reading of Esther partly by analysing the genealogy of Mordecai and Esther:

> There was a Jewish man in Shushan the citadel and his name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish a Benjaminite[19] who had

18 S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure*, SBL Dissertation Series (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 40.

19 My choice to follow the convention of translating איש ימיני as 'Benjaminite' is intended to accentuate the link with Saul but I am aware of alternative translations including 'a righteous man'. I will offer a fuller discussion in Chapter 2.

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> been exiled from Jerusalem among the captives exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled.
>
> ESTHER 2:5–6 (own translation)

There are several problems with the information given here. If ever Mordecai was a figure in history, there is no evidence to justify dismissing that the genealogical line down to him had persons with names Jair, Shimei and Kish. However, such persons could not be, at the same time, the very towering figures who bore the same names in other biblical traditions. For instance, the Shimei who gave voice to the tradition opposed to David's occupation of the monarchical throne of biblical Israel and who seemed loyal to a Benjaminite (Saul) royal tradition was a son of Gera not Kish. If the Kish mentioned in this material is intended to call to memory the father of Saul, the first monarch of biblical Israel, then both he and up to his fourth generation of descendants are likely to have been dead long before the Babylonian deportations of the early sixth century. Moreover, if Mordecai and Esther were among the Babylonian deportees instead of Kish as suggested in the NRSV edition,[20] then the two would have been too old to play the roles assigned to them in the story of Esther which is set some one hundred and twenty years later when Xerxes was the Persian emperor. Robert R. Wilson notes that the fundamentalist reading of genealogies that insisted on treating them as historical material has since become untenable in the post Enlightenment era.[21] It became apparent that most patriarchal names were actually hero-eponyms of various peoples that populated the region and that the relationships assumed in most genealogies were reflections of the links of the peoples who had these 'ancestors' as tribal eponyms. Genealogies were not meant to convey historical detail but were aetiologies to explain how tribes and subsequent states viewed each other. Genealogies, in short, make one point or another. In the present case, in brief, I shall be arguing that the author of Esther uses genealogy to make a social constructionist connection between the communities in and behind Esther with the biblical Jewish memory of diaspora.

20 With a note entry, the NRSV replaces אשר (who) the first word of Esther 2:6 with the name 'Kish'.

21 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 2.

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4 The Problem with the Imperial Context of Esther

Diaspora is a term that has come to receive widespread usage in both the public and academic discourses only in recent years.[22] When Babylonia dealt the final blow associated with the memory of a Jewish exile at the beginning of the sixth century, the territory that later became the Persian province of Yehud was clearly outside the political borders of the conquering empire. Movement from Jerusalem to Babylon or any of the other Babylonian centres would mean a real crossing of political borders. The scenario that emerges from the narrative of the biblical Jews is one that has been used to build an understanding of diaspora; one that has its definitive tenets modelled around, among other things, forcible removal, being taken beyond political boundaries of birth and being scattered to several destinations away from the homeland. Within a period of less than five decades, the geo-political dynamics of the region changed drastically. The meteoric rise of Cyrus the Great and the expansionist programme that continued for several decades after his death meant that territories such as Eretz Israel became a province of the same political structure that exercised political dominion in those territories that served as host lands to the exiled Jews.[23] The narrative context of the story of Esther, let alone the period in which it was written, implies a much later period when the whole region was under the same imperial hegemony (Esther 1:1) with considerable freedom of movement across the known world.

5 The Road Ahead

I have divided this study into five chapters. Effort has been put in arranging the chapters in a narrative sequence and the reader is strongly advised to go through the work accordingly. However, each chapter is structured as a semi independent unit; according 'full' treatment to some aspect of the thesis of this project. Consequently some material may overlap and a few little repetitions could not be completely avoided.

In *Chapter 1* I will attempt to do four things. First, as already noted above, studying Esther requires not only mere acknowledgement of the existence of various versions but also some consideration on which of these to place primary focus. I will demonstrate that there are multiple versions of Esther,

22 K. Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

23 This study is using the expression 'Eretz Israel' to denote the stretch of land appropriated in the memory of biblical Israel as its rightful possession promised to the patriarchs.

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which I will review resisting the primacy of any of them and then make a case for my choice to focus on the Hebrew version. This study proceeds from an understanding of the various versions as having descended independently from different sources attesting to different traditions.[24] Second, I am concerned with presenting a summary overview of interpretive paradigms used in reading Esther. This is an exercise I deem important because of the conviction that it does make a huge difference whether one is reading a work of fiction or one that claims historical accuracy. Esther holds the two polarities in close balance[25] such that some delineation is necessary. In this section I will also attend to some reader-response methodologies that seek to reclaim biblical texts such as Esther as works of resistance.[26] Third, I will offer a concise consideration of some contributions to Esther studies with the word 'diaspora' in their titles. The intention here is to explore how the acknowledgement of the diasporic location of Esther has not translated into a component of central importance in the reading of the story and book. This study takes the view that a theoretical analysis of diaspora would mean a world of difference. Fourth, I offer some estimation of the methodological strategies this study will employ. Working from the perspective that newer methodologies need not necessarily disregard the gains of earlier readings, I will begin by offering some sort of justification for raising historical questions in relation to a text like Esther, which could have been an outright work of fiction. It is in this section that I will also state the case for the consideration of diaspora and analogy as phenomena of profound significance in developing a new methodological strategy.

In *Chapter 2* I direct my efforts at foregrounding the phenomenon of diaspora in reading the book of Esther, paying particular attention to Esther 2:5–6. First I will locate Esther studies in the long history of Biblical Studies as an academic discipline. Once its place in the Hebrew Bible and various Christian codices became secure (however precariously), the book enjoyed the 'privileged' reading accorded to Holy Scripture as the word of God. A literal reading was preferred with its narrative content taken for a fact.[27] Following the awakening of critical thinking and the associated shift of epistemological discourses towards the natural sciences – developments culminating in and associated with the Renaissance – biblical narratives (Esther included) increasingly became

24 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984).

25 As exemplified in the work of Joyce G. Baldwin, it has proved difficult to stick to one or the other, resulting in coinage of such labels as 'a historical novel'. J. G. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 17.

26 T. K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

27 For example, see Josephus, 11.6.1.

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the subject of critical scrutiny. It is a period that saw epistemology leaning towards favouring scientific enquiry with the net effect on biblical studies seeing development of methodological strategy aimed at according the study of history 'all the status and prestige of the natural sciences.'[28] Frederick Beiser aptly sums up the agenda of the nineteenth-century German historicism in which the historical-critical method emerged:

> The agenda of historicism was simple and ambitious: to legitimate history as a science. Its aim was to show what makes history a science. All the thinkers in the historicist tradition … wanted to justify the scientific status of history. They used "science" in a broad sense of that term corresponding to the German word "Wissenschaft," that is, some methodological means of acquiring knowledge.[29]

Joshua A. Berman laments the authoritative voice of source critics who, riding on the success of a morphing perception of history as a science, argued their positions as unassailable.[30] Additionally, inroads made during this time in deciphering inscriptions in cuneiform and other ancient scribal signs made available to scholarship huge amounts of data to read alongside biblical texts. When it became apparent that that which the church insisted was God's revelation was common to other (and older) civilisations, insisting on biblical assumptions as unassailable became increasingly unreasonable.

Second, I will attend to the critical questions basic to the study of Esther, which are mainly concerned with the text(s) of Esther. The availability of several extant versions of Esther as already discussed above only compounded the problems. The glaring textual disparities beg for attention and a study of Esther such as proposed in this project will need to spare some space for their consideration.

Third, I will move from 'lower criticism to 'higher criticism' where I will look at the gains of the application of the historical-critical methods to Esther. Similar to questions raised elsewhere in the Bible (for example in the study of the Pentateuch), Esther studies concerned itself with questions of sources, form (genre and *Sitz im Leben*), tradition history, redaction and canon. I will assess how such studies have contributed to reading Esther.

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28 J. A. Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 211.

29 F. C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

30 J. A. Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah*, 240–8.

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Fourth, I will work at re-defining the centre of Esther by demonstrating that contrary to popular readings, the institution of the Purim festival is not central to the concerns of the community behind Esther. Re-reading the absence of the name of God, יהוה, in the MT version of Esther, the oversubscription of royal terminology and the thematic connection with the institution of ancient Israelite monarchy, I hope to set the stage to argue for the centrality of diaspora in reading Esther. Fifth, as already alluded to above, I will focus on how the genealogical material in Esther 2:5–6 is being used in this study.

In *Chapter 3*, I offer an assessment of the historical reality as portrayed by biblical and other sources available. The use of diaspora in reading Esther assumes a political order of clear territories and identifiable communities. Typical of comparable literature, the milieu that is presupposed in Esther is that of an abrupt discontinuance of political administration following the rise of Cyrus the Great and the subsequent establishment of the Persian Empire. The purpose of this chapter is to show that by taking into account alternative sources, it is possible, at the very least, to subvert some assumptions, perpetuation of which would impede a more accurate reading of Esther. First, I will offer an assessment of the available sources of Persian history. The determination of Esther's historical veracity has been dependent on its congruence with these sources and, as already pointed out in Chapter 1, whether Esther is a work of history or fiction is of significance in determining how it is read. Second, I will offer a critical assessment of the portrayal of Cyrus the Great in biblical sources in the light of the royal ideology of ancient Israel. Despite its tenacious hold on the religious and political landscape of ancient Israel, there is sufficient evidence to show that the monarchy did not command widespread acceptance. It is rather interesting to note how biblical sources seemed ready to not only embrace the positive portrayal of Cyrus but also appropriate his memory to their own (for example Isaiah 45:1). Third, in what Amélie Kuhrt has referred to as a matter of Cyrus the Great enjoying 'good press',[31] several myths, legends and assumptions emerged about both the person of Cyrus and the Persian Empire he is credited to have authored. In this section I will look at such assumptions and assess them on the basis of that which has come to be known of Cyrus and Persia. Fourth, I shall anticipate briefly the diaspora language that will occupy the next chapter. The Jewish community behind Esther and many others scattered across the empire on the one hand and those resident in the Persian province of Yehud on the other, are all under the same imperial hegemony.[32]

31 A. Kuhrt, 'The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy' in *JSOT* 25 (1983) 83–97, 83.

32 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', 28.

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In addition, the Ezra-Nehemiah traditions suggest that the circumstances of early sixth century do not apply anymore since a free passage had already been granted to as many as were willing to return to their homeland.

Chapter 4 is devoted to offering conceptual, etymological and semantic considerations of the term diaspora. This is an exercise deemed important as a precursor to applying a theory-nuanced understanding of diaspora to reading Esther as per the hypothesis of this study. First, I will attempt to anchor the discussion in its context by attending to the prevalence of diasporic terminology in modern-day popular and academic discourses. It is important that I acknowledge the influence of a heightened awareness of mass-population movements in the last thirty years or so[33] and my personal circumstances as a first generation Zimbabwean migrant now living in the United Kingdom in shaping this study. Second, the discussion will attempt a critical analysis of the etymology of the word diaspora, paying particular attention to its conceptual and semantic peculiarities. This study distinguishes itself from others that use diaspora merely for purposes of denoting the sense of being away from a homeland to one that takes serious note of the theoretical undertones associated with the term. Third, I will discuss the trajectory by which a theoretical framework for studying diaspora is emerging. Despite being a relatively recent field of academic enquiry, diaspora studies have already gone through four distinct phases, which now form the context of an emerging theory.[34] I will attend to these phases and prepare for the application of a theory-nuanced concept of diaspora to Esther in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 is devoted to assessing whether a third or second century Jewish community outside Eretz Israel could be appropriately described as a diaspora. This study proceeds with the awareness that the use of the term diaspora in both popular and academic discourses is a relatively new development. In an attempt to support emerging evidence of the existence of Jewish communities outside the Persian province of Yehud and bring to bear the diasporic profile of the community behind the book of Esther, I have chosen to use a modern day analogy. To this end, in this chapter I will do three things. First, I will offer a summary discussion of the principle of analogy, tracing it from its classical formulations in antiquity to its normative and pervasive usage in current epistemologies. Second, I will offer a brief analysis of the analogous community chosen for this study, that being the Zimbabwe 'diaspora' community resident in the United Kingdom. Third, I will then apply the insights of this study to the book of Esther according to the hypothesis of this project.

33 A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 178.
34 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* 2nd ed., (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 1–12.

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The *Conclusion* of this study will comprise two main components. First, I will offer a summary of the findings of this research. It is my hope that I will have shown not just the inadequacy of Purim as the interpretive key for reading Esther but also the centrality of diaspora as the central heuristic key. I also hope to have successfully demonstrated that apart from being a mere location of existence; diaspora denotes a mind-set that must be taken seriously in reading literary traditions of a people. Second, I will look at outstanding issues, which, because of the focused nature of this study, could not be addressed. I will be presenting these outstanding issues as areas that will reward further inquiry.

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CHAPTER 1

Interpretive Frameworks and Methodological Strategies

1 Introduction

While the dominant view in modern Esther studies is that the story of Esther is aetiology for the Jewish Purim festival, this study argues for an alternative interpretive model for the book, one that places significance on the concept of diaspora as a more viable alternative heuristic key. I will begin by looking at the manner in which the book of Esther has been read. Over the years, the Jewish festival Purim has become not only the *raison d'être* for the story[1] but also the central key for its interpretation. This project aims to show how the concept of Jewish diaspora, emerging from the memory of an experience of exile and, indeed itself amounting to an on-going exile, is central to reading the story of Esther. I will offer a brief survey of the manner in which the story has been received and attend to some of the historiographical challenges associated with the book. By use of discussions in the young academic field of diaspora studies, I want to set the stage for an alternative reading that posits behind the story of Esther a Jewish community with a self-perception typical of modern day diaspora communities.

Commenting on 'style and structure' in the introduction to her book on Esther, Linda Day writes: 'The book of Esther is written in a straightforward narrational style. Except for a few instances, the Hebrew is clear and understandable, despite the frequency of rare terms, but the simplicity of the book belies its consummate artistry.'[2] Evidently, reference here is to the Masoretic Text (MT) version of the book of Esther, which is generally accepted to have been written in Hebrew. The tendency to refer to the MT version as the only version is commonplace. Jo Carruthers' 2008 publication makes no mention of the Alpha Text (AT) and while the Septuagint (LXX) version of Esther is referenced a respectable number of times, the dedication of a whole section to 'Godless Scripture'[3] betrays a latent bias towards MT version supremacy. If the tradition bearing witness to (and culminating in) the LXX were given an equal

1 C. A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther* (New York, NY: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), xxx.
2 L. M. Day, *Esther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 3.
3 J. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 21–27.

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consideration then Esther would be read as 'Godful Scripture', just as any other portion of the Jewish and Christian scriptural tradition. However, in their defence, these notable scholars' interests in the story of Esther may have lain in aspects that did not warrant treatment of versions other than that of the MT. Still, it would seem that a reading of the story of Esther that does not mention alternative versions is difficult to justify. In this section I aim to offer an assessment of the various ways in which the story of Esther has been told and read. It is my intention here to make an informed choice in the end, regarding which version(s) this study is focusing on.

That the story of Esther has come down to us in several versions is a detail that was already acknowledged as early as the turn of the twentieth century when Lewis Paton declared, 'Manuscripts of the Book of Esther are more numerous than of any other portion of the Old Testament.'[4] The lack of textual agreement in these 'manuscripts' as established by Textual Criticism,[5] explains (in part at least) the emergence of several versions in circulation today. Three different extant versions of the story of Esther are in circulation to this day and these are the MT version, the LXX version, and another also in Greek known as the Alpha Text (AT). The AT, when taken without the additions from the LXX, seems to witness to a version predating both the LXX and MT versions as will be shown in the analysis below. The general tendency in Esther studies regarding these versions has been to assume that the MT (or at least a version anticipating the MT) is the oldest, translated (with additions) into the LXX and that the AT (associated with the Lucianic Text)[6] came last. That is sheer conjecture. Carey A. Moore has argued for the independence of the AT version as witness to a textual tradition independent of both MT and LXX Esther versions.[7] Looking at these three versions, there is nothing to show the primacy of one against the others or evidence for an awareness of the other versions in any of the three. It seems reasonable to start off from the understanding that an older story, no longer accessible to the modern reader, was independently developed in various traditions culminating in these and other versions. To the three mentioned here, one may add the variations found in the Targumim and Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*, which are more of re-telling of the story with

4 L. B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*. ICC Series. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 5. The use of the word 'manuscript' here may be misleading if read in the context of its modern usage. However, Paton's discussion shows that he is referring to the multiple extant versions of the story of Esther.

5 As will be shown in Chapter 2 below.

6 C. A. Moore, 'A Greek Witness to a Different Hebrew Text of Esther' (1967) reprinted in C. A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther*, 521–528.

7 C. A. Moore, 'A Greek Witness to a Different Hebrew Text of Esther', 521–528.

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twists of their own. It is only imperative that a discussion of the story of Esther such as the one this study envisages begins by making an intentional determination of which version to focus on primarily.

2 The Extant Versions of Esther

As already alluded to above, the story of Esther has been told in several ways. There are three extant versions in circulation today. All three tell the same story. However, there is nothing to explain how they relate in terms of which came first neither is there any evidence of awareness of the others in any one. It is also doubtful that the three share a common textual ancestry. I will now turn to offer a brief description of each.

2.1 *Masoretic Text Version of Esther*

The Masoretic version, arguably the version with the widest modern circulation, was written in Hebrew and has come down to us in ten chapters. Reading the book of Esther in the last century has not moved much from linking the text in its final form with the Jewish Purim festival. David Clines suggests two related ways of reading the MT Esther that would aid in our effort to establish how the story would have been shaped before it was finalised in the form in which we have received it. First, we need to ask questions related to plot. Put differently, how much neater would the plot of the story be without the Purim festival element? To this end Clines states: 'A word of hesitation about the connection of the plot with the festival of Purim should be first expressed.'[8] If the connection of the festival of Purim to the core of the story of Esther is established as suspicious, then its use as the interpretive key becomes questionable too. The plot is clearly about the threat to a diaspora community of Jews at the mercy of a powerful but witless Persian monarchy. Whether that threat can be read as directed at the entire community or to an individual is not important at this point for if one Jew were to suffer for the fact that they were Jewish then the entire community would be affected. Evidently, as Levenson noted, the community behind the story of Esther had managed to turn exile into diaspora.[9] They were well settled with Mordecai rising to a position of worth such as to warrant fierce competition from others vying for power. This is the community under threat. The one behind this threat is not the Persian authority but another foreigner, a descendent of Agag named Haman. At some

8 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 26.

9 J. D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 16.

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point in this study I will pay closer attention to the detail we are given in the sketchy genealogies linking Haman and Agag on the one hand and, on the other, Mordecai and King Saul (1 Samuel 15). For now, let it suffice to say that the threat facing the Jews in the Esther narrative can be located in a long standing feud of foreign individuals seeking favour of their Persian overlord. The drama and tension of the plot unfolds as the reader learns of the clash, the movement of each 'warring' party, the building of the tension, the definition of the threat and finally to the reader's relief, the aversion of the threat. Chapters 1 and 2 set the scene and provide the background needed to make sense of the story. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 we see the threat taking shape. In Chapter 6 we see the reversal of fortunes, culminating in the resolution of the crisis in Chapters 7 and 8. I agree with Clines' summation where he says:

> If we focus on the threat to the Jews … we can narrow down the threat more precisely to the letter of Haman as the instrument or even the substance of the threat, and to the letter of Mordecai as the averting of the threat. The one is the complication, the other is the resolution.[10]

By Esther 8:17, the story is finished and the curtain can be drawn. The core of the story of Esther must be read as comprising of the threat of the Jews and its resolution with the plot fully developed and concluded by the end of Esther 8.

Second, working with the hypothesis that the story ended with 8:17, I have sought to explore whether there are any further textual discrepancies to warrant putting aside Chapters 9 and 10 as later additions and seek a reading of MT Esther that is justifiably independent of the Purim festival. Up to this point (Esther 8:17), the Jews were never portrayed as wanting to do anyone any harm. The story is about what was going to be done to the Jews. The threat was expressed in terms of total annihilation: 'Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods' (Esther 3:13). The Jews are to be slaughtered at the orders of the king with no recourse to self-defence. The letter of Mordecai sufficiently cancels that threat: 'By these letters the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to assemble and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province with their children and women, and to plunder their goods on a single day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar' (Esther 8:11–12). The close

10 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 26.

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grammatical constructions allude to the opposite end of a saga, the threat and its resolution. Befittingly, the celebration of Esther 8:15–17 marks the end of the saga. The language of Esther 9 and 10 is not only confusingly repetitive but also totally disjointed from the core plot. We are told that at the aversion of the threat, many stood in awe of the Jews with some even joining the Jews (Esther 8:17). Earlier in Chapter 6 we were told of how Haman's wife had spoken also in awe of the Jews: 'If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him' (Esther 6:13). Nowhere in this story, apart from Haman himself, are we told of anyone who could be called an enemy of the Jews, not even Haman's wife or his sons. The massacres that constitute Esther 9 are so unnecessary and have no justifiable link to the core of the story. We are left persuaded that this is a later addition of the story of Esther as testified by the AT version of Esther which ends at the rough equivalent of MT version Esther 8:17.

2.2 *The Septuagint Version of Esther* (*the B Text*)

The LXX version of the story of Esther differs from that of the Masoretic most notably in that it contains six passages that are not found in the MT version of the story of Esther. In the Latin translation by Jerome, the six passages were taken out of the text since they formed no part of the available Hebrew text and were placed at the end of the book under the title, 'Additions to the Book of Esther'. Needless to say that on their own, edited out of the story of Esther, they do not cohere narratively. The content of these passages includes; (A) seventeen verses about a dream that Mordecai had concerning pending destruction and his discovery of the eunuchs' conspiracy which is the opening passage of the LXX version, (B) seven verses inserted just after Masoretic version Esther 3:13 giving a detailed account of the king's edict issued against the Jews having been tricked to do so by Haman, (C) thirty verses placed just after Esther 4:17 which have the prayers for deliverance by Mordecai and Esther, (D) sixteen verses describing the tension of Esther approaching the king, (E) follows immediately after (D) replacing MT version of Esther 5:1–2 and is made up of twenty-four verses coming after Masoretic 8:12 being the details of the king's edict to save the Jews at the request of Mordecai. This is after Haman's evil intentions had been exposed and (F) ten verses inserted at the end being an interpretation of Mordecai's dream within the context of the story of Esther. When the Additions are taken away, the LXX version of Esther agrees with the MT rendering very closely. In a recent publication, Jonathan Grossman insinuates the same when he merely acknowledges the existence of the LXX version saying: 'In general, one could state that sections of the concealed reading of the Masoretic become revealed in the Septuagint, particularly in respect to the

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theological plane of the story.'[11] The implication here is that the author of the LXX version worked with the Masoretic Text version of Esther (or a a *Vorlage* of MT Esther). This study takes a different approach. Having established that beyond these three primary texts is a plethora of sources, rather than assume that the LXX Esther is a translation of the MT version and therefore later and inferior, I elect to treat it as an independent translation of one or the other of the earlier sources. Where there is agreement in the core of the versions the explanation lies in the similarity of their respective or shared *Vorlage*.

2.3 *The Alpha Text Version of Esther*

For a very long time, the AT was associated with the Lucianic Biblical Text where it was read *as* an attempted revision of the LXX's rendering of the story of Esther. The perception that the AT was merely a revision of the LXX version of Esther was further strengthened by the fact that in its earliest manuscripts it followed the same structure, including the six additions discussed above at appropriate points.[12] The inclusion of the Additions, which, for many years, has been the reason for its relegation to inferiority behind the LXX version of Esther, became the reason for its emancipation as a version of value. A close attention to the linguistic peculiarities of the Additions showed 'they exhibit a text-type very much closer to the LXX's than AT usually has … [making] it more than probable that they are secondary to the AT, just as they are secondary to the LXX as compared to the MT.'[13] When links with the Lucianic Text are cut off, the AT becomes a text of value in its own right. It was not until Carey A. Moore's dissertation on *The Greek Text of Esther* in 1965 and R. Hanhart's edition in the Göttingen Septuagint of 1966 that the link between the Lucianic Text and the AT was not only questioned but also denied completely.[14] By removing the additions and paying attention to its language, Moore concluded:

> That the A-Text of Esther is a translation of a Hebrew *Vorlage* quite different at certain points from that of either the MT or the one presupposed by the LXX may be briefly indicated by several lines of argument, namely, on the basis of 'Additions', 'Omissions' and 'Abbreviations', and, finally, Variations in the A-text when compared to the B-text and the MT.[15]

11 J. Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and thee Hidden Reading* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 12.

12 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 72.

13 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 72.

14 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 72.

15 C. A. Moore, 'A Greek Witness to a Different Hebrew Text of Esther' (1967) reprinted in C. A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther*, 525.

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It is for this reason that Clines argues that 'We are entitled therefore to consider the AT – *without* the Additions – as a text in its own right, which perhaps also witnesses to a Hebrew text other than the Masoretic.'[16] If this is granted then the AT becomes important not only as it stands side by side with the other versions but also in so far as it testifies to a different textual tradition beyond the MT and LXX versions of Esther.

• • •

The foregoing shows that no one version of the story of Esther can be accorded primacy with certainty. It seems choosing a version on which to place focus does not require much theorising. The inclusion or omission of a phrase or section, confessional orientations, semantic considerations and interests of interlocutors are only a few factors that can influence the choice of the version of focus in a study such as this one. Following Proto Esther, which is far removed from any version available today, the task to make sense of the story to a Jewish audience must have necessitated the plethora of 'manuscripts' and versions. The LXX testifies to the fact that the tradition defined by the Hebrew versions following Proto-MT version of the story of Esther (assuming it is out of this Hebrew tradition that the current MT version of Esther emerged) was by no means the only one as the LXX version itself is evidently interspaced with several other Semitic and Greek texts. Where the current MT, LXX and AT agree there is no doubt they share some common source. However, their significant differences point to the existence of sources exclusively available to one at the exclusion of the others. I have elected to make the MT version the text of my primary focus in this study. The choice to focus on the MT version of Esther is based on my initial conviction that the *Vorlage* lying behind all these versions is pre-Hellenistic and is written in Hebrew. While the MT version, like the Greek versions, is arguably late, it makes possible comparison with such portions of the Hebrew Bible as the Joseph narratives that may provide significant clues in its interpretation. In addition, I have chosen the MT Esther as the version of primary focus for this study since it is the version that underlies the works with which I will be in conversation. I make this choice with the awareness that it is not at the exclusion of the other relevant versions and sources, to which I will refer as would become necessary.

16 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 72–3.

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3 Interpretive Frameworks: History, Fiction or Resistance

In this section I will offer brief treatment of some of the ways in which the story of Esther has been perceived – perceptions deemed important in suggesting heuristic keys to interpreting the book. This is intended to set the stage for the interpretive model this study is proposing. The implication of the Babylonian conquest of the sixth century BCE is that all the people claiming Israelite origins were now effectively under foreign rule. According to the biblical narrative, the Assyrian onslaught on Samaria around 722 BCE meant the demise of the Northern Kingdom. The final blow was dealt by Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar's successful conquest of what remained of the Hebrew territories in the early sixth century BCE, meaning that all those sharing a common memory as citizens of sovereign kingdoms of Israel and Judah lost self-rule. While numbers are difficult to ascertain given the kind of material available, the scenario that emerges is one where a sizeable portion of the population is scattered across the known world.

The story of Esther is set around the Persian citadel of Susa, a location far away from the Persian province of Yehud. The material connecting the hero and heroine of the story with the deportation at the hands of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (Esther 2:5–6) can be read to imply that events that the story recounts are from an era several generations after the said deportation. It would seem that the community behind the story of Esther is well settled in their foreign context, a community that seems to have come to terms with its situation in a manner of speaking, with what started as an exile now a diaspora, a distinction I will clarify later. Therefore, understanding the story of Esther as a diaspora story is something the story demands of its reader. The gap this thesis sets out to fill is the one constituted by the fact that reading Esther through the ages has not employed the concept of diaspora with the prominence it deserves. This is not at all surprising given that it is only in recent years that the phenomenon of diaspora has come to the attention of scholarship, emerging as an independent field of academic inquiry.[17] The opening statement to a collection of essays on concepts, theories and methods associated with the new academic field of inquiry of diaspora and transnationalism aptly nuances this position:

> The success of concepts in the social sciences is often measured by the number of academic publications referring to them, by their capacity to

17 W. Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora* 1: 83–99, 83.

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> cross the boundaries of disciplines and by their penetration into mass media and wider public discourses. If, however, we take qualitative criteria such as the explanatory power of a concept and its precision in distinguishing different social phenomena as indicators for its usefulness in social theory and research, then successful proliferation may diminish academic value. This diagnosis seems to apply to the concept of transnationalism and diaspora. Both have become extremely popular since the 1990s and are today applied to much broader classes of phenomena.[18]

The term 'diaspora' has become a buzzword. Given its narrative context and the rise in awareness of mass population movements in the modern world, a surge in reference to the story of Esther as a diaspora story is not at all surprising. As will be shown in the scholarship review below, consistent to the dictates of intellectual interests relative to historical eras, reading Esther has tended to perambulate the range marked by history on the one end and fiction on the other. It is a fundamental tenet of this thesis that the admitted diaspora setting of the story of Esther brings a dimension beyond the history-fiction plane and paying homage to a theory-nuanced understanding of the concept is essential to reading Esther in its various versions.

The multiplicity of manuscripts and versions discussed above makes it reasonable to assume that right from the point in time when the story came into being there was no one particular way of telling it. The polarities the story of Esther includes may be responsible for the lack of a clear-cut interpretive framework such that each version may actually be an attempt to harmonise the tensions the book so skilfully embodies. For instance, with particular reference to the MT rendering as the version of my choice, the challenges of the book's historical veracity notwithstanding, Tal Davidovich toys with the idea of the possibility that Esther could have been one of the individuals who occupied the position of *Resh Galuta*[19] (leaders of the Jewish diaspora) a tradition traceable to the second century of the Common Era and lasting to about the fifteenth century in some places.[20] It is a tradition that places these individuals in positive perception in Jewish nationalist memory as they are credited with preserving Jewish communities often at serious personal risk. The predicates associated with positive Jewishness are used consistently in describing these

18 R. Bauböck and T. Faist, 'Introduction' in eds. R. Bauböck and T. Faist, *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 7.

19 T. Davidovich, *Esther, Queen of the Jews: The Status and Position of Esther in the Old Testament.* (Winona Lakes, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 123.

20 T. Davidovich, *Esther, Queen of the Jews*, 123–131.

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characters: pious, brave, shrewd, patriotic and just. They are, by and large, the heroes of Jewish cultural memory. Esther and Mordecai fit this office almost perfectly.

However, Jon Levenson has noted a 'complete lack of interest in the land of Israel'[21] in the MT version of the story of Esther, which can be read as an indication of a contradiction and a lack of patriotism. While the story's Jewish protagonists Esther and Mordecai are cast in favourable terms, they breach convention in so many ways; Mordecai voluntarily gives away a Jewish girl under his care to a foreign man as a concubine. It is such a horror to read that there came a night when the beautiful Jewish girl prepared herself for the sexual gratification of the Persian king. Except for the community fast called for by Esther at Esther 4:16, there is nothing much to show of the piety of these two. These are tensions within the story begging a reconciliatory interpretation of some kind right from when the story was first told. The very manner in which the story develops courts controversy. That the story would be told, heard and transmitted in various ways is therefore not surprising as it was rendered open by its very nature. My interest is not in the unlimited number of ways in which the story of Esther could be and was actually told but, rather, in understanding why it was told in the ways it was in the selected version of focus. Reference will be made to other versions in order to highlight deviations and variations. In narrowing focus to a limited number of versions I take cue from Jo Carruthers' observation where she notes:

> To insist that any piece of writing can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways may be a fact of linguistics; far more interesting are the limited ways in which a piece of writing has been meaningful in specific contexts.[22]

Interpretation of each version of a story that floats freely, retaining type and form but fluid in detail must pay attention to the elements that distinguish the version under study. Where Esther is concerned, there could have been an Assyrian or, broadly speaking, ancient Near Eastern template very useful in clarifying some of its elements. However, when adapted for a Jewish audience there are ways in which that template was employed. I will now turn to look at some of the ways in which the story of Esther has been told and heard. At this

21 J. Levenson, *Esther*, 14.

22 J. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries.* Blackwell Bible Commentaries. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 5.

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point I only note how the story's admitted diaspora context has not featured with any prominence in its interpretation.

3.1 *Reading Esther as a Work of History*

As is typical of texts emerging from antiquity, the author of the book of Esther claimed historical credence in a number of ways, one of which was by pointing to other documents and texts that corroborated his story. The book mentions numerous texts and records. The decision to banish Vashti from royal responsibility is to be written down (Esther 1:19) and the consequent instruction to all men to take charge of their respective households was sent out in written form (Esther 1:22). The immediate aftermath of the incident when Mordecai thwarted a plot to assassinate the king is given as 'And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.' (Esther 2:23b), a record later read to the king the night he suffered inexplicable insomnia (Esther 6:1). As part of Haman's evil plot, letters were sent out with the instructions defining the harm designed for the Jews (Esther 3:12–15). When tables turned and the duo of Mordecai and Esther had gained the king's favour, letters with a counter message were again written (Esther 8:5–14). The reader is told that 'Mordecai recorded these things and sent out letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus …' (Esther 9:20). While the tendency to commit events to some written record can be argued to be associated with the Persians generally speaking, the author of the book of Esther employs the practice with the clear intention to give historical credence to his narrative. Whether the author's audience had access to the said texts – the letters, books of law, the book of the chronicles – is immaterial. The powerful effect of mentioning 'independent documents' cannot be ignored. For the author and his audience, the book of Esther exudes confidence in its historical worth. If still in doubt the reader is challenged, 'And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honour of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?' (10:2). On the basis of this textual evidence, it is reasonable to infer that for the author of the book of Esther and its first readers the narrative is in fact an accurate account of events.

Buttressing the view that the book of Esther is a work of history, as already pointed out in the introduction above, the details of the narrative contain many features that seem to reflect accurately the Persian era. For example: the size of the empire (Esther 1:1), the extravagance of Persian royalty, an elaborate system known as דת (a detailed codex of legal stipulations), an effective postal and infrastructural network; are details corroborated in other sources (Herodotus

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is one as will be shown in this study). Josephus' reading of the MT version of the story of Esther leaves no doubt that the understanding here is that the book is an accurate account of historical occurrences.[23] Even more than two thousand years after Josephus, when the historical value of the book has been reduced to negligible levels, the power of the accuracy of some of its historical detail has forced coinage of such terms as 'a historical novel.'[24] Frederic Bush describes the author of Esther as '... a narrator who shows himself at every level to be so fully cognizant of the setting and circumstances of the Persian world of his story ...'[25] As pointed out above, this is because when read against the historical works on the Persian Empire such as those of Herodotus, the book of Esther's level of accuracy is somewhat high for a work of fiction.

Admittedly, there is a wide range by which readers of Esther have appropriated historical credence to the book but it must be acknowledged that beginning with the author and his audience, there has been a sustained impression that in Esther we have an actual occurrence at its centre. The story of Esther has at its core the concept of the threat of a genocide of the Jews: 'Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods' (Esther 3:13). Efforts have been made to locate in history, an experience that could pass as a deliberate intention on the part of a foreign aggressor to wipe out an entire Jewish community. To that end, critical reading of the book of Esther has tended to point to the persecution of 168–165 BCE under Antiochus Epiphanes IV, aimed at thwarting the Maccabean revolt, and Robert Pfeiffer sees Haman's edict of Esther 3:13 cited above as 'a travesty of that of Antiochus.'[26] Pfeiffer further argues that unlike the book of Daniel, which on the basis of 11:34 can be dated during the actual persecution, the book of Esther can only be later than 165 BCE when there was Jewish total triumph over the heathen.[27] Pfeiffer reads the forcible conversion to Judaism of 8:17 as only true during the reign of John Hyrcanus (135–104 BCE), who forced the conquered Idumeans to adopt Judaism by way of compulsory circumcision and, on that basis, Pfeiffer concludes that Esther must have been written around 125 BCE.[28]

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23 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.6.1.

24 J. G. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 17.

25 F. W. Bush, *Ruth & Esther* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1996), 263.

26 R. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948), 741.

27 R. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 741–2.

28 R. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 742.

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Although Pfeiffer's dating is not now generally accepted, this example shows that if reading Esther starts with a conviction that what we have in the book is some historical account and if an experience to suit the story line cannot be established in the timeframe we are given in the story itself, then we are free to roam through history and find one. This is why Yehuda Radday has noted that the 'many commentaries written on it deal with historicity and historical background …'[29] The perception that in Esther we are working with a historical account is a perception that has had considerable impact in terms of how the book has been read and interpreted.

3.2 *Reading Esther as a Work of Fiction*

Reading the book of Esther as a work of fiction is not by any means novel. Several centuries ago, biblical scholars started to break away from confessional approaches to the biblical texts sponsored by ecclesiastical hegemony. What the Church taught about biblical texts was supposed to go unchallenged: 'First of all you must understand this, that no scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation.' (2 Pet 1:20). The Church's short leash on scriptural interpretation did not go unchallenged. The Reformation was fuelled, in part, by an increasing mistrust of the Church's use of the Bible, leading to arguments for such positions as *Sola Scriptura* by which reformers argued against all doctrine they felt was not backed by some biblical text. In tandem with developments in other fields, gains made in such academic areas as the classical languages provided biblical scholars with tools by which to study the Bible in its original languages. In addition, biblical texts were now being subjected to the same sort of scrutiny as any other literature. The historical critical method developed in this wake, when it was felt that biblical texts needed not be privileged but should make sense within the general scientific guidelines set for all other forms of literature. Needless to say, the outcomes of this development have not been favourable to biblical narratives. Carol Meyers commenting on the process of history-writing notes:

> It has also made clear that biblical sources from which we might attempt to write history were never intended to be eyewitness accounts or even general summaries of events. Rather, they are highly selective and imaginatively expanded accounts of the meaning and nature of past times.

29 Y. T. Radday, 'Esther with Humour' in Y. T. Radday and A. Brenner, eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press,1990), 295.

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> That is, the texts themselves have strong ideological biases that distort or mask events and characters.[30]

With the rise of general scepticism towards biblical material as sources of history, alternative frameworks for reading the book of Esther (and other 'historical' books from antiquity) became necessary.

The admitted accuracy of some historical detail notwithstanding, that the book of Esther has concerns other than history is apparent. As will be shown in Chapter 3 of this thesis, historical sources of comparatively more considerable worth on Persia tell of how Darius who was related to Cyrus the Great but not himself an heir, upon Cambyses' death, travelled ahead of the army to reach Persia and formed a tight conspiracy of the seven highest noble families of the Persian Empire known as the Seven Great Houses from which the queen of Persia would be chosen always, with the Achaemenid family as chief.[31] With their support, Darius managed to kill Gautama, the heir apparent, and ascended to the throne, effectively establishing an oligarchy.[32] It must be noted here that 'Persian ethnicity became an important prerequisite for all top administrative posts throughout the empire's history.'[33] It is clear then that neither Mordecai nor Haman would qualify for the posts they are said to have held in the plot, nor could the Persian king have married an unknown immigrant. In the argument of Bush, as already cited above, this is the sort of detail the author of the book of Esther must have been aware of. The detail we are given about Esther, Mordecai, Haman and the relationships that emerge in the story of Esther are anything but historical. This is part of the reason why Geo Widengren dismisses the book of Esther as one 'without much historical value.'[34] The historical framework is increasingly becoming unsustainable and other ways of reading biblical texts in general and the story of Esther in particular have become necessary.

One way to go round the problem has been to look at the form in which the story is written, hoping that this way it can be read with other stories with which it shares literary form. When compared to the Joseph narrative, among other things, notable are the striking similarities and a general agreement on

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30 C. Meyers, 'Early Israel and the Rise of the Israelite Monarchy' in L. G. Perdue, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001 61–86), 67.

31 Herodotus 1:107–130.

32 L. Allen, *The Persian Empire: A History* (London: The British Museum Press, 2005), 42.

33 J. L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 52.

34 G. Widengren, 'The Persian Period' in *Israelite and Judean History* in J. H. Hayes and J. Miller, eds., (London: SCM Press, 1977), 493.

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structure of content. It is in this wake that gains made in the area of form criticism have attracted the attention of those working in Esther studies. The book of Esther is in form folklore, as Susan Niditch notes:

> In fact, the book of Esther appears to be the most obvious candidate for folkloristic approaches. Its characters seem to be drawn from a veritable motif index of treacherous villains, fair maidens of lowly status who become wives of kings, upright and wise heroes, stupid and ineffectual kings.[35]

Herman Gunkel distinguished folktales from myths by the fact that in the former 'the figures of the great gods are still not yet present'[36] and acknowledges that 'in the folktales handed down to us by a later period the gods have forced their way in, here and there, without the nature of the story being otherwise changed.'[37] John Barton describes folklore as 'narrative material that has been transmitted orally in traditional cultures'.[38] In that process of transmission, the said narrative material takes turns and twists as it is re-told by people in different times and places. The variations in how the same story may be told is a result of local communities re-telling the same tale with local tint.

Gunkel traced the origins of the folktale to dreams and visions embodying 'some wish or other of primitive humankind; such 'boulamatic [sic] folktales' depict as reality what in hard life could, of course, only remain an unattainable desire.'[39] Julius Wellhausen represents a tradition going back centuries when he remarked concerning patriarchal traditions:

> It involves no contradiction that, in comparing the versions of the tradition, we should decline the historical standard in the case of the legend of the origins of mankind and of the legend of the patriarchs … the patriarchal legend has no connection whatever with the times of the patriarchs.[40]

35 S. Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority' in A. Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 28.

36 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 29.

37 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 29–30.

38 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996), 114.

39 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 30.

40 J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* J. Sutherland Black and A. Menzies, trans. (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1885), 360.

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In other words, there is not much historical knowledge of the patriarchs to be gained in the narratives about them. If anything, all we get is a reflection of the world in which the narratives emerged, which, in Wellhausen's estimation, was not until the exilic period at the earliest. It is an inference I am making here that what we read in the book of Esther reflects more about the community behind its production and the world of its author than what it claims to be about. While Gunkel discussed folklore as a specific form definitive of much of the biblical narrative.[41] The multiple versions of the story of Esther, their variations and similarities are not at all peculiar if the argument that the story is a folktale and a work of fiction can be sustained.

The immediate task for those scholars whose reading develops from the understanding that Esther is a work of fiction or a folktale is to show reason why it became accepted as part of both Hebrew and Christian canons. Jo Carruthers offers an in-depth catalogue of reactions and discomforts concerning the inclusion of the book in the canon.[42] The tendency in Esther studies has been to explain the book's inclusion in the canon on the basis of its close association with the Purim festival. It would seem that this is the intended effect by the final redactor as is clearly spelt out in the text: 'Therefore these days are called Purim, from the word Pur … the Jews established and accepted as a custom for themselves and their descendants and all who joined them – that without fail they would continue to observe these two days every year, as it was written and at the time appointed' (Esther 9:26–27). As early as the turn of the twentieth century, Samuel R. Driver wrote matter-of-factly: 'The aim of the Book of Esther is manifest: it is to explain the origin of the feast of Purim, and to suggest motives for its observance.'[43] Writing almost seven decades after Driver's publication, Brevard S. Childs maintained the same position where he states: 'There is general agreement that the major purpose of the book of Esther is to provide the historical grounds for the celebration of the feast of Purim.'[44] In a 2001 publication, almost a century after that of Driver, Adele Berlin underlines the link between the book and the Jewish Purim festival where she declares:

> If we did not have Purim, with the reading of *Megillat* Esther as its centrepiece, Esther would languish in obscurity. In fact, it seems likely that Esther was included in the Bible because of the celebration of Purim.[45]

41 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 33–36.

42 J. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 8.

43 S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* 9th ed., (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), 481.

44 B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 599.

45 A. Berlin, *Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), ix.

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For more than a century now, the dominant view in Esther studies has been to read the book in close association with the festival. The fact that the book of Esther is one of the few books of the Hebrew bible conspicuous by their absence on the list of the Dead Sea scrolls has caught the attention of scholarship:

> The festival of Purim was definitely not celebrated by the Jewish sect of Qumran as part of their sacred calendar; and so, not surprisingly, the Book of Esther, which had as its *raison d'être* the establishment of Purim, has not been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Moreover, according to the Talmud, some Jews continued to reject the book as late as the third [and] fourth century A.D. (*Megilla 7a; Sanhedrin II*).[46]

Joan E. Taylor points out that the claim that the Dead Sea Scrolls were the property of the community of the Essenes hurriedly put away ahead of the Roman invasion of 64 CE is only a hypothesis. She presents the possibility, among many, that these documents could have been part of the library of the Jerusalem temple,[47] rendering the absence of the Esther scroll more difficult to explain. However, to insist on the connection of the Qumran catchment and the Essenes serves to further demonstrate how closely the book's canonicity is tied to its association with the Purim festival.[48] The close link between the book and Purim does not only explain the book's inclusion in the Hebrew Bible canon but has also become the dominant heuristic key for its interpretation. The book is read essentially as aetiology for Purim. I concede to the importance of Purim in terms of the text's transmission and reception but would like to maintain that the details of the text's coming into being and the consequent processes that must inform its interpretation are more complex than the obvious. That the text says it is about Purim (Esther 9:26) does not necessarily make it so. Employing a hermeneutic of suspicion, this study proceeds from an understanding that there is more to the book of Esther than we are given.

3.3 *Reading Esther as an Exercise in Resistance*

Voices reading Esther outside the spectrum of history-fiction have come largely from the angle of resistance. The story is told within a framework of hegemonic structures that, for the modern reader, begs attention. Three are most

46 C. A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther* (New York, NY: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 370.

47 J. E. Taylor, *The Essenes, the Scrolls and the Dead Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 272–275.

48 J. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 8.

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conspicuous. First is the overarching power of the Empire of Persia against a powerless people claiming common ancestry in biblical Israel. Second is the nature of the relationship among the Jews on their own with the authoritative 'home' based, Jerusalem or Temple centred majority with those of their kinsmen scattered outside the Persian province of Yehud.[49] Third is the perennial imbalance of power in gender relations tilted in favour of the male gender as Athalya Brenner-Idan remarks concerning the character of Esther: 'Curiously then, Esther is 'queen' in nothing but her title and dress …'[50] Real power lies in the hands of the male protagonists of the story. It can be argued that running through its variety of versions is a constant dichotomy privileging some as perpetual occupants of a 'centre' while others remain forever peripheral. New avenues opened up in the Hermeneutic of Suspicion, traceable to the work of Paul Ricoeur stating that stories are told from the perspective of the powerful and, as such, for any story ever told there is another behind it. Of a hermeneutic of suspicion, Homi K. Bhabha states: 'For the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present.'[51] Interaction with texts from the past must not be limited only to what is stated but must also seek to make sense of what is not said. On the basis of this approach, Esther studies began to attract voices that set aside questions of history to pursue those of power relations. One example of the application of this approach to the book of Esther is in the work of Timothy K. Beal who says of his book:

> This book is a meeting-place between the Bible, especially Esther, and contemporary discussions of identity and social agency. Specifically, I focus on ambiguities inherent in gender and ethnic identity, questioning the possibility of defining "us" and "them," self and other, and exploring ways in which those ambiguities can lead to political transformation. In Esther, a game of self-definition is played out over against woman as other (the "other woman") and Jew as the other (the "other Jew").[52]

49 While I am not in agreement with Elsie Stern's thesis that the story of Esther was produced in Eretz Israel as a satire for diaspora Jews (I will attend to this more closely under Literature Review below), I do share her sentiment that the relationship between home based Jews and those in diaspora was characterised by some kind of tension.

50 A. Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* 2nd edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 32.

51 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

52 T. K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

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Beyond the dominant historical critical questions, Esther has readily drawn the attention of Postcolonial critics and hermeneutics from the margins, including and not limited to African/Asian, Black and Feminist/Womanist, who have found in Esther a narrative readily available for their suggested interpretive models built against an ethos of resistance.

The book of Esther has been open to all manner of interpretive strands. For example, Yoram Hazony offers as one possible explanation for the king's long spell of celibacy following Vashti's dethronement as queen as because:

> Ahashverosh [sic] has already suffered the consequences of allowing a woman to assert her own will in a relationship, and it is likely that fear of repeating a mistake – perhaps a fear of women – has been responsible for the lengthy delay before he is prepared to return to the field.[53]

The power dynamics effectively leaping out of the narratives make one wonder whether we are all reading from the same text. It is not surprising that being one of only two books to make it into the Hebrew Bible canon bearing the name of a woman and with that woman arguably its main protagonist, feminist or womanist discussions on Esther abound. The range of opinion in this regard is considerably wide. On the one hand are such negative perspectives as expressed by Alice L. Laffey when she states that 'buried in Esther's character is … full compliance with patriarchy.'[54] Yet as Jo Carruthers notes: 'Esther would indeed be invoked as a model of female submission, but more often than not (certainly outside theological contexts) she represents the sexually problematic woman, the heterodox woman and even the warrior woman.'[55] With particular focus on diaspora, this study will pursue this question further, exploring how women have played such pivotal role in contexts of resistance against hegemonic status quo without themselves being empowered in any significant ways. Here I admit to an awareness of readings emerging from the angle of resistance and an intentional but limited engagement with such as I explore a reading of Esther that has the concept of diaspora at its centre. However, its present form, in rabbinic literature that will be referenced in this project and in the male dominated historical interests dominating Esther studies, the diaspora reading I propose cannot afford to ignore completely the

53 Y. Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther* revised edition (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2000), 27.

54 A. L. Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 216.

55 J. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 3.

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question of how the book of Esther was transformed to become predominantly 'the story of Mordecai' (Esther 10:2).

4 The Concept of Diaspora in Esther Studies

The story of Esther has attracted attention for as long as it has been known. Attempting a summary of everything that has been said about Esther would not be possible to do justice to the great work that has already been put in. In this section I will pay attention mostly to contributions that include the word 'diaspora' in their titles or devote sizeable sections to the phenomenon. Having limited myself to the last five decades when the concept of diaspora has permeated public and academic discourses as will be discussed in greater detail later, I have arranged these in some chronological order beginning with the earliest.

4.1 *W. Lee Humphreys*

In his discussion of the two canonical 'diaspora texts'; Esther and Daniel, W. Lee Humphreys describes them as 'the most exclusive and nationalistic units within the Bible.'[56] Paying particular attention to their final form, Humphreys notes how these stories portray clearly distinct Jewish communities surrounded by foreigners. In this article published in 1973, Humphreys pays attention to the texts' admitted diaspora contexts:

> This essay will suggest that at the foundations of the books of Esther and Daniel are tales of a particular type, which along with their considerable entertainment value, develop a particular theological emphasis addressed to the emerging Jewish communities of the Persian and hellenistic diaspora. They suggest and illustrate a certain style of life for the Jew in his foreign environment.'[57]

Underlying Humphreys' suggestion is a reading that depends heavily on biblical narrative chronology. His suggestion takes as given the fact that there were identifiable post-exilic Jewish communities in the Persian period and beyond at the heart of whose existence was a quest to maintain their identity. Of course, the emerging questions of the very identity of ancient Israel and

56 W. L. Humphreys, 'A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel' in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 92. No. 2 (June, 1973), 211–223, 211.

57 W. L. Humphreys, 'A Life-Style for Diaspora', 211.

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the increasing scepticism on the chronology of biblical narrative are developments predated by Humphrey's suggestion. In addition, diaspora as an area of academic inquiry is a development that has taken shape only in the last three decades and, as such there are insights available now that were not at Humphreys' disposal more than forty years ago. His interpretation of their final form is that the diaspora stories 'have been taken over into a new framework that stresses an exclusiveness and even a nationalistic stance over against and in conflict with the foreign context of the Persian and Hellenistic diaspora.'[58] Typical of the dominant approaches of his time and given the limited tools at his disposal, Humphreys' suggestion to read Esther (and Daniel) as a tale of diaspora does not develop into a new heuristic key as it remains tied to historical considerations.

4.2 *Sandra Beth Berg*

While her dissertation, later published in 1979, does not include the word diaspora in the title, Sandra Beth Berg devoted an entire section of her work to discussing Esther and diaspora. She made note of the fact that a diasporic consciousness was part of the elements that shaped the development of the story of Esther:

> The storyteller also indicates his belief that the Jews of the diaspora were part of the elect people by the manner in which he introduces Mordecai: Mordecai's genealogy (Esth 2:5) points to the connections between the pre-exilic Patestinian [sic] Jews and the Jews of Susa.[59]

This notation is made as Berg pursued the theological concept of election of the Jewish people. To support the view that Berg found the outside-Yehud location to be of some significance in reading Esther, Berg devotes an entire section of her monograph comparing the book of Esther to the story of Joseph.[60] However, her overall thesis was developed around a reading of Esther that employed what she identified as the story's dominant motifs, namely; banquets, kingship and obedience/disobedience. The concept of diaspora is not among the identified dominant motifs and, consequently, has no direct bearing to the manner in which the story is read.

58 W. L. Humphreys, 'A Life-Style for Diaspora …', 223.

59 S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 180.

60 S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 123–142.

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4.3 *Michael V. Fox*

Like Berg's work discussed above, while the title of the work of Michael V. Fox that I am focusing on does not include the word diaspora, the phenomenon is given considerable attention. In Fox's opinion, the principal message of Esther is plain and simple, that 'Jews everywhere in all generations should celebrate Purim.'[61] However, in the complexity of the narrative, that basic theme is not necessarily its central theme as it is interlocked with several other subthemes. Of the six questions that Fox raised in building a catalogue of the subthemes critical to understanding Esther, one is specifically around the concept of diaspora: 'How can Jews best survive and thrive in the diaspora?'[62] While Fox goes on to focus primarily on characterisation in Esther, the importance of the diaspora element does not escape his awareness:

> Themes do not always become messages. In some matters … the author observes without inculcating specific lessons. But taken together his ideas constitute an ideology, for he tries to persuade us to see the world the way he does. The Esther story is a metaphoric world, a concentrated vision of the reality of Exile, and the vision itself teaches Jews to make their way through the life they face.[63]

It is my observation that in Fox's work on Esther the concept of diaspora is only acknowledged but the work proceeds to pursue interests that do not require the concept's centrality. Moreover, Fox's reference to diaspora here, like that of many others, is not theory nuanced but rather limited to the narrative plot's location away from Eretz Israel.

4.4 *Timothy S. Laniak*

Timothy S. Laniak places the book of Esther within the plane of history as enunciated by the biblical narrative, reading it as part of the literary gamut offering 'another kind of data on the identity crisis that remained in process long after Cyrus formally allowed the repopulation of Yehud.'[64] Laniak sees Esther as a diaspora text in so far as it locates its main character in a place corresponding to his understanding of diaspora as a peripheral identity:

61 M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Eugene, Orig.: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 3.

62 M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 4.

63 M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 4–5.

64 T. S. Laniak, 'Esther's Volkcentrism and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism' in Crawford, Sidnie White and Leonard J Greenspoon, eds., *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 78.

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> Esther, like other figures in diaspora stories, lives at the boundaries of two worlds: her Jewish world with its center in Palestine and the Persian world in whose center she now lives. She is marginalized in both contexts, in one by physical distance in the other by emotional distance.[65]

For Laniak, the character of Esther personifies the extremes of shame that came with exile and the honour that came with total victory over the enemy of the Jews crafted and delivered exclusively in exile. That the book of Esther makes no reference to Eretz Israel and ends with the Jews well established in Persia makes Laniak agree with earlier scholars that described the book as the only truly diaspora text.[66] Laniak's reference to Esther as a diaspora text is informed by the location of the narrative plot of story away from Eretz Israel and does not change much in terms of how the story is generally understood. For Laniak, Esther's connection with the Purim festival remains central to reading the story.

4.5 *Elsie Stern*

Of all the works in Esther studies that mention the concept of diaspora in my ensemble, Elsie Stern's 2010 article represents a clearly distinct position. In the works before her, and others that have been published after hers, the general tendency is to read Esther on the basis of its out-of-Yehud context. Stern takes a completely different approach:

> In this essay, I will challenge these prevalent assumptions regarding the diasporic nature of Esther and suggest that the Hebrew version of Esther can be profitably read as a Judean text that is critical of strategies of Diaspora living that are not oriented towards Jerusalem and grounded in particularist practices.[67]

As pointed out in the introduction above, Stern argues that diasporic elements such as the tension of assimilation to the culture of foreign overlords and loyalty to Jewish ideals and an anxiety riddled existence used to describe the community behind Esther 'would also hold true for life in the land of Israel before and after the exile.'[68] Apart from a few loanwords, the Hebrew version

65 T. S. Laniak, 'Esther's Volkcentrism and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism', 79.

66 Here Laniak refers to Solomon Goitein (1957) as cited by Jon Levenson (1976) who called Esther the only true book of the exile because it shows no interest in the land of Israel.

67 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora' in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (1) (2010), pp. 25–53, 26.

68 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', 28.

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of Esther does not hint at bilingual textual construction normative to narratives dealing with Persian imperial context as is the case with Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel.[69] On the basis of these and other factors, Stern argues that the Hebrew version of Esther is a Judean text written not in defence of but rather as a critique to life in diaspora.[70] While Stern's argument offers an interesting alternative to the monolithic usage of the concept of diaspora in reading Esther, it leaves a number of questions unanswered. The earliest reception of Esther, while with its fair share of challenges, portrays a different story. As will be appropriately referenced in the relevant sections and chapters below, the Targumim, Josephus and many other Jewish commentators up to as late as the sixteenth century CE readily appropriate Esther to the story of the Jews. Barry Don Walfish has argued that the book of Esther was one of the most commented upon in the Middle Ages, rivalling Song of Songs and the Psalms: 'Many commentators observed that the Scroll of Esther was a popular subject of exegesis and, some felt compelled to offer justification for embarking on yet another commentary.'[71] If it was a Judean story aimed at ridiculing diaspora, it is very unlikely that the Jewish hero and heroine of the story would be cast in such positive light and that the story would sustain interest to Jews outside the centre for so long. For this study however, whether Esther is written in Judea or outside the Persian province of Yehud is not of major significance, but rather that diasporic existence is central to the development of its plot.

4.6 *Anne-Mareike Wetter*

In her article published in 2011, Anne-Mareike Wetter contributes to the long drawn discussion on the meaning and identity of the term (ם)יהודי in MT Esther. She sees definition and translation of this term as key 'for one's understanding of the book of Esther, and of the branch of Diaspora Judaism it represents.'[72] By making reference to such works as *Ethnicity*,[73] with fully developed ethnic theories, Wetter shows to have had at her disposal, academic tools in the area of Social Science research that were not available to earlier scholars. All things considered, Wetter concludes:

69 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', 26.

70 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', 31.

71 B. D. Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 5.

72 A. Wetter, 'How Jewish is Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish? Tracing Ethnic and Religious Identity in Diaspora Narrative' *ZAW* 123, pp. 596–603, 597.

73 A. Wetter, 'How Jewish is Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish?, 598 n6.

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> The "Jews" in *Esther* may not fulfil our expectations, but they clearly think of themselves as the rightful heirs of the "Jewish" literary tradition, a tradition they appropriate on the one hand, and from which they emancipate themselves on the other.[74]

Wetter's employment of ethnic theory offers valuable bedrock for appreciation of some of the diasporic elements characterising the self-understanding of the community behind Esther that this study will employ. Joseph Blenkinsopp sees the use of the term יהודים as contemporaneous to the emergence of Judaism as a religion, which he dates in the Persian period.[75] However, it is my view that by focussing discussion on one concept (that of (ם)יהודי) there is more to the concept of diaspora that is left out. On the whole, it is the term (ם)יהודי, not diaspora, that is central to reading Esther for Wetter.

4.7 *Aaron Koller*

In a recent publication on Esther, Aaron Koller devotes an entire chapter to exploring the connection between the diaspora element in the book and the traditions of Jewish Exodus.[76] In addition to other concepts, for Koller the calendar connections are too close to be merely coincidental and to this end he avers: 'Surely no one could miss the coincidence that the story of the salvation of the Jewish people in this new book was also effected on Passover.'[77] Koller cites Gillis Gerleman who has a list of thirteen striking similarities between the story of Esther and that of the Exodus.[78] What differentiates the two tales is equally significant; the place of God in the narratives, Moses as the hero of the Exodus exits the palace in order to work out salvation for the Jews whereas Esther enters it, Moses is a rebel whereas Esther is part of the establishment to the end, the tale of the Exodus is serious while Esther is comic and at the end salvation in Exodus is marked by movement to a new place whereas in Esther the saved Jews remain where they were when the saga started.[79] Koller uses diaspora to explain these major differences:

74 A. Wetter, 'How Jewish is Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish? 603.
75 J. Blenkinsopp, *Judaism: The First Phase* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 28.
76 A. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90–106.
77 A. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 91.
78 A. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 91.
79 A. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 92.

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> With no God, one can only hope for survival until the next generation. This is not mere fatalism, though: in diaspora, one tends to view the present as "the time of now".[80]

For Koller then, it is diaspora that explains why in Esther, a re-telling of the Exodus takes new twists and alters in subtle but significant ways the basics of the old story. However, where interpretation of Esther is concerned it is the memory of the Exodus that is central to reading the book.

•••

The foregoing literature review is by no means exhaustive. However, it is representative enough to allow for observations essential for this study to be made. In summation of the above literature review therefore, it is clear that the concept of diaspora in relation to reading Esther has not only been acknowledged but has also been given considerable attention. This is not in itself surprising given the diasporic setting of the story. Thus, 'history' as portrayed in the biblical narrative has been assumed without critical reflection and the diasporic element in Esther has been because there was a Babylonian conquest in the early sixth century with traumatic effects on what remained of ancient Israel. It is also generally assumed that Babylon fell and gave way to a more tolerant Persian administration that treated Jews and all former captives benevolently. Depending on interests of the author of each of the works reviewed above and (to some extant) the methodology employed in the work, reading Esther has proceeded with diaspora as a concept only in interpretive peripheries. It is not surprising then that thematically speaking, there has been no real progression of the use of the concept of diaspora in the last four decades; diaspora remains a marginal component in reading Esther employed only sporadically. The thesis of this study aims to fill in this gap by placing diaspora at the centre of Esther's interpretation. I will now turn to discuss the methodology by which this study will proceed.

5 Methodological Strategies

Once upon a time, when the question of how to read a biblical text was raised, the answer was readily available; biblical texts should be read within their respective historical contexts. That time is not very long ago. Biblical scholars

80 A. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 95.

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were confident that by using the Bible itself, placing it in the general milieu of the ancient Near East and taking into account the 'evidence' that was expected to come out of the young field of biblical archaeology, a neat picture of *Wie es eigentlich gewesen war* would emerge. While there was a lot of heat generated as scholars debated how much credence should be appropriated to the biblical texts as their primary sources and the finer detail of the picture that would emerge as a result of their efforts, there never was doubt that an historical reconstruction of the biblical world was not only possible but also central to reading the Bible. The exchange across the Atlantic between Julius Wellhausen in Germany on the one hand and William F. Albright in North America on the other in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is most memorable indeed. Both these schools shared confidence that, despite their differences in detail, some historical conclusions could be drawn. This is evidenced by the titles of their respective academic progenies' contemporaneous publications.[81] It is not surprising then that the historical critical method in biblical studies, for more than a century became *the* way of reading the Bible.

In Philip Davies' 1992 publication entitled *In Search of "Ancient Israel"*, metaphorically speaking, the boat was rocked to the point of sinking by pulling asunder the concept of ancient Israel, hitherto assumed an established fact. Davies argued that 'ancient Israel' is a scholarly construct and not the same as the Israel of biblical literature.[82] William G. Dever, one critic of the wave emerging out of this 'provocative little book'[83] expresses the gist of Davies' thesis in this publication in these terms:

> All the texts of the Hebrew Bible in its present form date to the Hellenistic era (as late as the 2nd–1st century). They are therefore "unhistorical," of little or no value for reconstructing a "biblical" or an "ancient Israel," both of which are simply Jewish and Christian literary constructs.[84]

This is a position that has found support and has been developed further in the works of modern day big names in the field of Biblical Studies such as Thomas L. Thompson, Keith W. Whitelam, Niels Peter Lemche, and to an extent, Israel Finkelstein, to name a few. Skirting the nature of their interests and assessing

81 Here I refer to John Bright's 1959 publication entitled *A History of Israel* and that of Martin Noth in 1960 entitled *The History of Israel.*

82 P. Davies, *A Search for 'Ancient Israel'* (London: Continuum: 1992), 16.

83 W. G. Dever, *What did the Biblical Writers Know and When did they Know It? What Archaeology can tell us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* paperback edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 28.

84 W. G. Dever, *What did the Biblical Writers Know and When did they Know It?*, 26.

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the merits of their work is an enterprise beyond the scope of this thesis.[85] Since the Davies' publication cited above, it can be said that where methodology is concerned, the academic field of Biblical studies can be justifiably perceived as in crisis. Writing ten years after Davies, V. Phillip Long expresses it aptly where he says:

> It is not uncommon nowadays to hear that biblical studies in general, and OT studies in particular, are in a state of crisis. Old consensus positions have been abandoned, and questions formerly thought to be answered are again open for debate.[86]

My interest here lies in the consequent methodological vacuum this school of thought creates by bringing back to debate questions that, forty years ago, were considered resolved. Debates raged about reconstructing the exact nature of the biblical world and the relationships that connected communities then, but no one would question that there once were patriarchs, an excursion into Egypt, an Exodus, a settlement of some sort in the land of modern day Palestine, a prosperous state of Israel under a united monarchy, a people belonging to that state who ended up scattered all over the known world in exile. Questioning these 'facts' as enunciated in biblical history poses very serious challenges to reading Esther in the manor that I propose in this thesis. If there was never an 'ancient Israel', the applicability of a reading of Esther that is centred on the phenomenon of diaspora must be proven rather than merely assumed. That becomes the core of the methodological challenge for this project.

5.1 *The Historical-Critical Approach*

In order to limit issues needing attention within the scope of this project and in order to remain focused on the proposed research question, I will refrain from a full-on engagement in the discussion on the historical value of Esther. In the next chapter I will devote a section to discussing some historical questions emerging in recent studies. Here I will only state that my approach to the book as the text of my inquiry is from the understanding that there is a fine line between imagination and history. I will draw from a work of fiction that

85 Dever offers a detailed critique of each of these scholars and the 'movement' they represent on pages 28–52 of *What Did the Biblical Writers Know.*

86 V. Phillip Long, 'Introduction' in Long, V. Phillip, David W. Baker & Gordon J. Wenham, eds., *Windows into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of "Biblical Israel"* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 1.

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has enjoyed considerable readership for almost three centuries to demonstrate my point. To this end I turn to Jonathan Swift's widely read work first published in 1726 entitled *Gulliver's Travels.*[87] It is, without any shadow of doubt, a work of fiction. It is a four-part story narrating the adventures of its hero, Lemuel Gulliver initially given as a surgeon and then later as a captain of several exploration ships who travelled to remote places of the world.[88] In the first two parts the protagonist encounters two communities who compare to the average sized man in stature at the rough ratios of 12:1 for the little Lilliputians[89] and 1:12 for the giant Brobdingnags.[90] It has been suggested that the whole idea of giant humans derives from Cavehill, a range of mountains silhouetted against the sky to form the shape of a sleeping giant that can be seen today in the author's native city of Belfast.[91] Themes associated with the narrative are many but the dominant view is that the book was aimed at satirising the conviction that the English form of governance was the best. The satire caused so much controversy such that the original publishers felt obliged to edit out several portions of the story to the disappointment of the author who, as a result, logged an official complaint under the pseudonym of Lemuel Gulliver:

> I hope you will be ready to own publicly, whenever you shall be called to it, that by your great and frequent urgency you prevailed on me to publish a very loose and uncorrect [sic] account of my travels, with directions to hire some young gentleman of either university to put them in order, and correct the style … But I do not remember I gave you power or consent that any thing should be omitted, and much less that any thing should be inserted; therefore as to the latter, I do here renounce everything of that kind.[92]

The four communities that Gulliver encountered were organised alternatively between forms of government that were worse or better than that which was known to the author's British audience. First was that of tiny Lilliputians who Gulliver found to be vicious and unscrupulous. When told of the exploits

87 J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Originally published in 1726 under the title *Travel into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships.*

88 J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*.

89 J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 30.

90 J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 62.

91 'Belfast Hills' available at www.discovernorthenireland.com accessed on 14 September 2016.

92 J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* Kindle edition, 5.

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of European governments and their use of heavy artillery in their own wars and in interaction with inferior communities they encountered as the colonial enterprise gathered momentum, the second community, that of the giant Brobdingnag, was appalled to say the least. The pattern is repeated in the next two, one worse followed by one better when compared to the British government then. The overall verdict is that no one form of government is absolutely ideal as the worse forms have their own positive aspects and the good have their weaknesses too. So while Jonathan Swift's tale is clearly a work of fiction, it is inspired by a real geological feature and derives its themes from a real historical milieu. It seems to me that this publication, though not a work of history, cannot be dismissed as of no historical value.

I approach Esther as the text of my inquiry from the viewpoint that any text is produced in a specific historical milieu and has its own history. I am of the conviction that in the details of the story is debris of history and in that history are crucial clues necessary to reading Esther. It is for this reason that at the base of the methodology I wish to employ for this study is the historical-critical approach. I approach the text of my focus from an understanding that the clear categories of history and fiction, employed exclusively, do not do justice to the text. I will endeavour to put together as much as I can of the world narrated in the story and, as far as it is possible, that in which the story took shape. Approaching my text this way is not an admission to it being a historical text neither is it a denial of the text's historical value. I have elected to proceed from the understanding that a close consideration of the milieu of its production and preservation will go a long way in illuminating the way it is read. In the next chapter, I will offer an assessment of how the historical critical methods have been employed in Esther studies. Now I turn to treat my proposed approach developed from the concept of diaspora.

5.2 *Foregrounding a Diasporic Approach to Reading Esther*

Approaching the book of Esther from a historical critical angle as outlined above has been done millions of times and on its own I do not think it would yield much in terms of new data. It is for this reason that I propose to use insights gained in the newer field of diaspora studies to shed light on the book of Esther. In this section I will offer a broad outline of the approach this study proposes in looking at the concept of diaspora insofar as it has evolved in the last few decades as an independent subject of academic enquiry. A detailed treatment of the subject of diaspora and a theory-nuanced analysis of the concept will not be until Chapter 4 of this book. The rise of academic interest in diaspora must be viewed in relation to the modern day increased movement of people across political borders in search for political asylum, work and other

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opportunities. As already noted a few times above, it is only axiomatic now to state that the term diaspora has become a buzzword. However, it is my opinion that academic attempts in the recent past to develop some sort of a theoretical framework with which to work with the concept provide for use of the concept in the manner such as this study is proposing. It is this study's submission that the theories emerging out of this exercise can and should be employed to illuminate biblical interpretation, particularly where it concerns texts such as Esther, which have an admitted diaspora context. Despite secularists' objections to religious and moral codes being imposed on social and legal matters, the interface of the Bible and migration has already started. James Hoffmeier notes that such objections notwithstanding, the reality on the ground is that various stakeholders continue to appeal 'to teachings, laws, principles, and practices from the Bible or are quoting Scripture as the basis for the positions they advocate regarding immigration and the treatment of illegal aliens.'[93] Perceived this way, the interaction of the Bible and the migration crisis has been predominantly a one-way matter with the Bible assumed to be capable of informing migration policies. This study aims to turn the tables by employing gains made in the field of diaspora studies to read a biblical text.

That the historicity of ancient Israel must be proven rather than assumed is non-negotiable. Yet the fact that that which has come down to us as fixed in the biblical texts attests to a people yearning for a place to call home cannot be disputed either. If biblical history is granted, even just in terms of the grand framework of things, institutions of ancient Israel such as the monarchy, priesthood and the temple ensured the security and safety of her traditions. The disruption occasioned by the Babylonian exile of 587 BC was of huge consequences. While the twentieth century Albright School to which John Bright belonged is known for its over-reliance on the biblical narrative for historical reconstructions, his view of the aftermath of the exile is widely held:

> The land had been completely wrecked. Its cities destroyed, its economy ruined, its leading citizens killed or deported, the population consisted chiefly of poor peasants considered incapable of making trouble.[94]

It is widely accepted by biblical scholars that fixation of the traditions of ancient Israel into writing was necessitated by a need to respond to this disaster. It is from this background that Paula McNutt posits; 'Persian period Judah is

93 J. K. Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 21.

94 J. Bright, *A History of Israel* 3rd ed., (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1983), 331.

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the most likely setting for the final construct of much of the material in the Hebrew Bible, even though many of the independent traditions originated in earlier periods.'[95] There seems to be a disparity in McNutt's statement when she locates the exercise that saw the coming together of the material of the Hebrew Bible to 'Persian period Judah'. I would consider it safe to leave it at 'Persian period' as the prevalence of Jewish communities outside Yehud[96] precludes exclusive Judean location. In any case, if Bright's rendering is granted, it would make more sense to assume that those capable of writing were among the deported 'leading citizens' than the remaining 'poor peasants'. Life in diaspora meant a new dispensation, one without institutions hitherto trusted to provide central guidance on socio-political and religious life. Committing her traditions to writing became necessary for Israel not only to preserve the aforementioned traditions but also as the only means to reach out to the Jews now forcibly scattered all over the known world. Put bluntly, the Bible came into existence in a context of diaspora. The choice of the story of Esther for this study is clearly not without reason for it is indeed a narrative of a tradition that is central to the identity and self-consciousness of the community or communities behind the biblical texts as a diaspora people. With particular reference to the story of Esther, that the context of the story is the Persian period is significant for biblical studies in general, as pointed out above, this being the period in which the bulk of the Hebrew Bible material took shape.

Robin Cohen offers an assessment of how the phenomenon of diaspora has developed over the years and how it has become a subject of interest to academic scrutiny. In his categorisation, he distinguishes and discusses in some detail four phases in diaspora studies namely; the prototypical, the expanded, the social constructionist critiques and the consolidation phases.[97] I am reading the genealogical material of Esther 2:5–6 as an attempt by the author of Esther to annex the experience central to the story to the one experience in the memory of the Jews responsible for the coinage of the term diaspora – the Babylonian exile. Expanded diaspora explains the added element in the story – the fact that for the larger part, the story shifts focus and develops on the nature of the experience of Jews at the hands of a foreign host. This is a deviation from prototypical diaspora, which explained the circumstances of the deportees almost exclusively on the basis of homeland factors that would have made the move necessary. The author of the story of Esther attaches the narrative to prototypical diaspora by its mere mention then goes on to focus on

95 P. McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 1999), 182.

96 As will be shown in the cartographic discussion in Chapter 5.

97 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* 2nd ed., (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 2–12.

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the harsh conditions of a life away from home. Social constructionist critique of diaspora offers the tools to attend to the inherent fractured nature of diaspora communities and the fluidity that comes with the fact that diaspora communities are essentially products of mobilisation, socially constructed and not necessarily clearly definable natural entities. I will show that the community behind the story of Esther, as reflected in the narrative, fits the label of diaspora and that the story of Esther must be read as a literary product to emerge out of a diasporic mentality.

The emerging diaspora theoretic framework acknowledges that understanding the phenomenon of diaspora, up to as recent as the middle of the twentieth century, was limited to the experience of the Jews: 'First the classical use of the term, usually capitalized as Diaspora and used only in the singular, was mainly confined to the study of the Jewish experience.'[98] It is not only an initial usage but also prototypical in the sense that even when the term became expanded to include experiences of other people, the Jewish experience became the model by which all others would be accepted as diasporic. Definitive of that model was an experience of trauma within the homeland, forcing the larger portion of an (if not the entire) ethnic population, to migrate to two or more destinations. Thus within the prototypical phase, the expansion of the application of the term was already underway to include the dispersion of the Armenians at the face of massive genocide, Africans due to slave trade and the Irish at the face of a devastating famine. It must be emphasised here that the major criterion for consideration of all these other peoples' experience as diasporas was because there was a perception that the trigger of their respective movements could be described, like that of the Jews, in terms of traumatic and irresistible force. The trauma of their experiences left them with no option but to migrate.

In opening up the concept to include circumstances of other people whose experiences could be argued as similar to that of the Jews as explained above, by the 1980s discussions on diaspora spiralled uncontrollably to levels of meaninglessness. It is from this background that the term then assumed, in William Safran's observation, a metaphoric designation where it was employed to cover all sorts of people: 'expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and minorities *tout court*'.[99] For reasons of wanting to make generalisations and make the phenomenon of diaspora fit into a paradigm such as would make it of academic use, Walker Connor broadened

98 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 1.

99 W. Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return' in *Diaspora*, 1 (1) (1991), 83.

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its scope in his studies to include 'that segment of a people living outside the homeland.'[100] The need for *en masse* dispersion became a natural casualty. The phenomenon was now open and William Safran pushed it a bit further:

> Lest the term lose all meaning, I suggest that Connor's definition be extended and that the concept of diaspora be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "centre" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should collectively be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.[101]

In the prototypical phase, diasporic experience could be explained primarily if not exclusively in terms of traumatic disturbances in the homeland. In Connor's definition and Safran's expanded version, the concept of diaspora became associated not only with the traumatic conditions of departure from homeland but also (if not more so) with the harsh conditions defining life in the destination communities. Levenson's reference to a progression from exile to diaspora must be read as a matter of making the best out of a bad situation. Diaspora is not desirable. Safran notes:

> Diaspora … connoted deracination, legal disabilities, oppression, and an often painful adjustment to a host-land whose hospitality was unreliable

100 W. Connor, 'The Impact of Homelands upon Diasporas' in G. Sheffer, ed., *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (New York: St Martin's, 1986), 16.

101 W. Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies', 83.

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> and ephemeral. It also connoted the existence on foreign soil of an expatriate community that considered its presence to be transitory.[102]

Such a conceptual vicissitude opened up the term, allowing all sorts of groups of people to either apply the term to themselves (emic) or have it applied to them (etic). One example that can be cited here is that of the nineteenth century system of indentured labour when the governments of strong economies such as Britain and the USA found themselves needing manpower after the successful antislavery campaign. While the resultant recruitment practices are marred by a lot of human rights abuses by modern day standards, it is still true that those that left their homelands did so voluntarily and had a theoretical right to return home if they so wished. It must also be noted that those that answered to the lure of indentured labour recruitment programmes were only a small fraction of their homeland population. To the numbers of indentured labourers were added those that came later to look for work, trade and business. In the end there emerged identifiable immigrant and/or expatriate communities in the destination countries which were now admissible under the expanded concept of diaspora.

For some academics contributing to the field of diaspora studies, the expansion discussed above posed some theoretical challenges. In mapping out the field of study around the phenomenon of diaspora, two core building blocks were given which are home/homeland and ethnic/religious community. Such conceptual frameworks were particularly poignant in a world totally different from the modern one, which is characterised by 'intersectionality, multiculturality and fluidity.'[103] About a century ago, identities were clear-cut with race, ethnicity and religion playing such pivotal roles in underlying socio-political order in a clearly developed sense of the nation state. The concept of diaspora, with putative 'groupness' would be correspondingly easy to skirt in such a context. The prototypical victim slant with distinct and unmistakeable building blocks dominated initial understandings of the concept of diaspora with considerable ease. That has evidently changed. Social constructionist critique of diaspora has shown how the concept of diaspora has been further expanded to include even virtual and cyber based communities.[104] These expansions have

102 W. Safran, 'The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective' in *Israel Studies* 10 (1), 2005, 36.

103 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 9.

104 J. Salazar, 'Online Diasporas: Theoretical Considerations on the Study of Diasporic Behaviour in *MMORPG*s' 2, presented as part of the proceedings of the 2013 Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) available at library.med.utah.edu accessed on 8 June 2016, 2.

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rendered the term almost meaningless. Diaspora theorists today are faced with two clear polarities; on the one hand is an expanded understanding that makes diaspora a free-for-all concept and on the other is one inclined towards limiting the concept to its etymology and history, applying it only to those communities meeting a limited list of criteria. The consolidation phase aims at establishing a working definition of diaspora that takes into account the concerns of the opposing sides. The starting point for such an exercise, it would seem, is to state what Diaspora Studies, as an academic discipline, is not:

> Diaspora theorists made no claim to explain the full spectrum of immigrant experiences, did not see their task as creating a progressive anti-racist movement (desirable as that may be), and did not seek to describe patterns of sociality and citizenship unrelated to some degree of prior kinship or religious affiliation. In other words, the concept of diaspora is not a magic bullet and cannot be used to slay all enemies.[105]

The chosen solution in the consolidation phase is to establish some sort of middle ground by taking a bit from each of the two sides. Representing the consolidation trend is one Khachig Tölölyan, who writes:

> Diasporists shaped by globalising discourses describe genuine erosions of the link between a bounded place and a people, diagnose it as irresistible, and pluralistic, multicultural, hybrid world of which they approve. Diasporists like myself, who want to argue that attachment to a place was indispensable to diasporic life and thought until very recently, and that despite its erosion it remains important today, must tread carefully in order to avoid the charge that we are either imitating discredited nationalist rhetoric about the link between land, people, and culture, or that we remain naive about the global spaces that have opened up in the past several decades.[106]

The consolidation phase has had to negotiate its way by, among other things, revisiting diaspora's two definitive blocks (dispersion and homeland orientation) as set in the initial prototypical phase and add yet another. While maintaining that in modern day diaspora the element of dispersion generally across

105 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 11.

106 K. Tölölyan, 'Restoring the Logic of the Sedentary to Diaspora Studies' in L. Anteby-Yemeni, W. Berthomière and G. Sheffer, eds., *Les Diasporas: 2000 ans d'historie* (Rennes: Presse Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), 138–139.

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state borders is essential, the impetus for such dispersion need not be strictly traumatic but may include voluntary migration as well. Brubaker notes that this criterion may be broadly interpreted 'so that dispersions *within* state borders may suffice.'[107] While a clearly defined sense of home/homeland remains essential to understanding diaspora, that homeland need not necessarily be real but could include imagined or virtual homelands.[108] Brubaker points out to the declining value of homeland orientation as a criterion for defining diaspora using studies that have shown several examples of modern day diasporas that are not so much inclined to returning to a particular place but to creating a culture in diverse locations.[109] To these two building blocks, in the consolidation phase a third is added; boundary maintenance – a criterion 'involving the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-a-vis a host society (or societies).'[110] Emerging from all this is an understanding that diaspora communities need not be strictly patterned against the Jewish model which had clearly defined homeland, ethnic and religious boundaries.

5.3 *An Analogical Approach*[111]

A view of the experience of the Jews, particularly the Babylonian exile, as the prototype of all future diaspora experiences works conversely to benefit the reading of narratives of such historically unreachable traditions. Biblical texts such as Esther, their little or no historical value notwithstanding, have been brought to life by events in the recent past such as the holocaust. The principle of analogy provides a critical tool by which experiences in ancient texts can make sense in light of modern analogies. Put simply, the principle of analogy states that for everything that our reality today cannot allow, narratives of such as having happened in the past must be treated with suspicion. For example, if very few people in the world today live for up to a century, to say there was a Methuselah who lived thirty-one years short of a millennium (Genesis 5:21–27) renders the historicity of accounts concerning him not only improbable but totally out of the realm of history. The principle of analogy states that 'everything in the past must find an analogy in the present if it is to be accepted as

107 R. Brubaker, 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 20:1, 1–19 (2006), 5.
108 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 12.
109 R. Brubaker, 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora', 6.
110 R. Brubaker, 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora', 6.
111 See also T. K. Mapfeka, Empire and Identity Secrecy: A Postcolonial Reflection on Esther 2:10' in J. Stiebert and M. Dube, eds., *The Bible, Centres and Margins: Dialogues Between Postcolonial African and UK Biblical Scholars* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2018).

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plausible.'[112] Ancient texts, which have come down to us, such as the Bible, require some form of deciphering before interpretation can take place. The content must make sense somehow. I have argued above that the Esther narrative has at its core a diaspora setting and must be read as a diaspora text. The principle of analogy provides a sound epistemological base with which to carry out a study such as this one. It is on this basis that I have chosen to draw from the experience of the modern day Zimbabwean community living in the UK who have called themselves and have been perceived by their compatriots back in Zimbabwe as part of the modern day Zimbabwean diaspora. To this end I have relied greatly on the work that has been done by especially Dominic Pasura and Joanna McGregor on the Zimbabwean community in the United Kingdom, whose works are consequent to ethnographic and field studies of this community.

5.4 *Methodological Strategies in Summary*

In summation of my methodology then, having placed the text of Esther in its historical context, I intend to employ a modern day diaspora theoretical framework to demonstrate how an exilic consciousness of זעוה (horror) proportions is central to reading Esther. I am aware of the historical gap between the text of my enquiry and the methodological framework I intend to employ. To this end, I intend to call into play the principle of analogy by analysing the dynamics of a modern day self-confessed diaspora community to frame the setting of this enquiry. Due care will be taken given that the experience of the community behind Esther has a rather long history, going back several generations. Comparatively speaking, the diasporic consciousness of the Zimbabwean community living in the UK today which I have chosen for my analogy is only a few years old and differs from that of second century Jewish communities in so many other ways. Notations of such differences will be made and their methodological challenges will be negotiated. At this point I must only state rather categorically that this is by no means a comparative study but, rather, proceeds from an understanding that modern realities can and must illuminate historically unverifiable texts like Esther.

112 J. L. Adams, "Introduction" in E. Troeltsch, *Religion in History* trans. by J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 5.

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6 Summary

In this chapter I have done four things. First, I have attended to the mere fact of the existence of several versions of the story of Esther and the interpretive complications arising from that fact. In the wake of attending to the multiplicity of versions of the story of Esther, I have also given some justification to my choice to use the MT version of the story as the version of primary focus for this study. Second, I have concerned myself with presenting a summary overview of interpretive paradigms used in reading Esther. In doing this I have shown that it does make a huge difference whether one is reading a work of fiction or one that claims historical accuracy, ends of a spectrum that the story of Esther holds in close proximity. I have also given expression to some reader-response methodologies that seek to reclaim biblical texts such as Esther as works of resistance. Third, I have reviewed a selection of contributions to Esther studied that have explicit expression of diaspora in their title or body of work. In that process I have shown how the acknowledgement of the diasporic location of Esther has not translated into a component of central importance in the reading of the story and book, thus setting the stage for the sort of reading this study is proposing. Fourth, I have offered some estimation of the methodological strategies this study will employ. I have shown that whether Esther is a work of history or not, historical questions are inevitable as any piece of literature is a product of a specific historical context and has its own history. I have concluded this chapter having foregrounded diaspora and analogy as phenomena of profound significance in developing a new methodological strategy for reading the story of Esther.

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CHAPTER 2

Foregrounding the Phenomenon of Diaspora in Reading Esther: a Particular Focus on Esther 2:5–6

1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will attend to the manner in which the book of Esther has been read, and continue setting the stage for the diaspora reading this thesis is proposing, by focusing on the primary text of this enquiry, Esther 2:5–6. As already acknowledged, the centrality of Purim's connection to the story of Esther has not only influenced its reception but also dominated its reading. In this chapter (as is the case with the project as a whole) I am working on the premise that interpretation of the story need not be dependent on its reception history, but must explore possibilities beyond the obvious. The historical-critical methods have dominated biblical studies for much of the past two hundred years. The gains made are well documented. Yet, at the same time, inroads made through interdisciplinary dialogue with such academic fields as anthropology, sociology and many others have opened up a world of possibilities for reading biblical texts. With newer methods of reading the biblical texts emerging from the margins (feminist or womanist, cultural, black, postcolonial, etc.) starting to gain ground, it is also true that the firm grip of the historical critical methods on biblical studies is fast waning. This project aims to build on the gains made in Esther studies so far by investigating how the memory of a Jewish diaspora could have shaped the literary repository known as the Hebrew Bible. Focusing on the book of Esther, I have proposed to explore how the experience of diaspora or, at the very least, a consciousness of such an experience is central to understanding the story of Esther.

2 Biblical Criticism and Esther Studies: a Trajectory

At the base of the quest to make sense of biblical narratives are questions to do with the complications already noted about the nature of the biblical texts themselves. For a long time, biblical texts were accepted as 'Holy Scripture', the infallible word of God as already cited in Chapter 1 above: 'First of all you must understand this, that no scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation' (2 Peter 1:20). While the author of this early New Testament epistle may have

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had something else in mind in making this statement, the assertion makes sense given the fact that the canonisation of scripture (in both Jewish and Christian traditions) was a process that had religious hegemonic authorities at the helm. Not only did religious leaders set the criteria by which a text would be accepted as canonical but also decided which texts met the criteria they had set. Determining how scripture should be read, ideally and logically, has remained an enterprise dominated by the structures that defined it in the first place. For example, in 1882, Julius Wellhausen had to give up a teaching post after ten years of service at the University of Greifswald as it became clear that his views were irreconcilably at variance with that of the Church of his time as expressed in his letter of resignation showing a struggle of conscience:

> I became a theologian because the scientific treatment of the Bible interested me; only gradually did I come to understand that a professor of theology also has the practical task of preparing the students for service in the Protestant Church, and that I am not adequate for this practical task, but that instead despite all caution on my own part I make my hearers unfit for their office. Since then my theological professorship has been weighing heavily on my conscience.[1]

Indeed, it was ecclesiastical hegemony that prescribed how the Bible would be read. However, it must be noted that very early in the history of humankind's interaction with these ancient texts, textual and content inconsistencies became apparent. Thus Welhausen, given as an example here, can be seen only as an epitome of a long standing tradition of wanting to make sense of the Bible – asking the kind of questions, using the sort of tools and coming up with the sort of suggestions that inevitably challenged the traditional hegemonic authorities' short leash on interpretation of scripture as assumed in the claim by the author of the New Testament epistle cited above. Engagement with Esther has followed the same pattern. The book had a rather turbulent start and late admission into the Hebrew Bible and various Christian canonical codices.[2] With reference to the creation of the Hebrew Bible canon and the sanctity of texts, Martin Goodman mentions Esther amongst the most

1 Taken from R. J. Oden Jr., *The Bible Without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1987), 20.

2 J. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 8.

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disputed texts.[3] The text of Esther has been subject to critical scrutiny right from the onset.

3 Textual Criticism and the Study of Esther

At the base of the apparent discrepancies were ones very basic and mechanical; ones to do with the 'text' itself. Readers of the Hebrew Bible have long realised that almost every portion of the Bible has been preserved in several manuscripts and, as Ronald Hendel has noted, the multiplicity of 'texts' poses serious challenges to reading them.[4] This is because the original texts have only survived in copies that often differed in several and, at times, very significant ways. While there is evidence that there was a move towards textual unification and establishment of an authoritative text dating way back before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the MT on which most Hebrew Bible scholars focus is a literary production of as recent as the seventh century of the Common Era or even later.[5] The texts having been transmitted manually, the differences could be accounted for within a range that included those made erroneously while copying on the one hand and deliberate mutations on the other. Copies available simply did not agree and the imperfections of the texts of the Holy Scripture became increasingly problematic not only in terms of interpretation but also where it concerned its authority.

With particular reference to this project's text of primary focus, the several versions of the story of Esther (even without 'The Additions') differ in certain instances in ways that suggest that someone(s) along the history of this story's transmission must have made deliberate changes. For example, the three extant versions of the story of Esther (as already discussed in Chapter 1) render the exact relationship of Mordecai and Esther in significantly different ways.[6] The MT Esther version asserts that when her parents died, Mordecai brought up his cousin Esther לו לבת 'to him as [a] daughter' (Esther 2:7). The LXX

3 M. Goodman, 'Sacred Scripture and "Defiling the Hands"' in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1990; 41: 99–107, 99.

4 R. Hendel, 'Plural Texts and Literary Criticism: For Instance, 1 Samuel 17', *Textus* 23, (2007), 99–101.

5 M. Cohen, 'The Idea of the Sanctity of the Biblical Text and the Science of Textual Criticism' in U. Simon, ed., *HaMikrah V'anachnu* (Tel-Aviv: HaMachon L'Yahadut U'Machshava Bat-Z'mananu and Dvir, 1979).

6 See also T. K. Mapfeka, 'Empire and Identity Secrecy: A Postcolonial Reflection on Esther 2:10' in J. Stiebert and M. Dube, eds., *The Bible, Centres and Margins: Dialogues Between Postcolonial African and UK Biblical Scholars* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2018).

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version of Esther describes the duo as related in these terms: επαιδευσεν αυτην εαυτῳ εις γυναικα. Admittedly, there may be translational challenges here but the most common insinuates that the tradition preserved in the LXX version has Mordecai bringing up his cousin not 'to him as [a] daughter' as rendered in the MT version but, rather, 'he brought her up for a wife for himself'. In any case, the fact that in the LXX version a few lines down, Esther is referred to clearly as της Θυγατρος Αμινδαβ ('the daughter of Aminadab') (Esther 2:15) shows that if it was the father-daughter relationship that was implied for Mordecai and Esther in the LXX, the vocabulary with which to express such a relationship with clarity was available to the author. The *First Targum to Esther* attests to a tradition that remembered Mordecai and Esther as a couple by expanding the Hebrew לו לבת (literally 'to him as a daughter') by introducing the word בית (house) to now read 'he brought her to his house and called her daughter'. Bernard Grossfeld has noted how the word-play in the expansion has helped in creating the allusions to a marital relationship between the two protagonists in Rabbinic parallels calling to service the imagery of yet another text:

> Read not "for a daughter" but "for a house". Similarly, it says: 'But the poor man had nothing except for one little ewe lamb, which he had brought up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own morsel, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter' (II Sam. 12:3). Because it lay in his bosom, was it like a daughter to him? Rather what it means is like a wife; so here too, it means like a wife.[7]

At this particular instance the AT does not help matters at all as it is at best ambiguous, agreeing with neither of the other two: και ην εκτρεφων πιστως την Εσθηρ θυγατερα αδελφου του πατρος αυτου (roughly 'And he was faithfully bringing up Esther, the daughter of his uncle').[8] Whether Esther was a wife or a daughter to Mordecai is a detail that is not attended to in the AT version of Esther. By Josephus' time (born 37 CE),[9] Mordecai and Esther were 'no longer' cousins but uncle and niece (note also that their location seemed to have changed from Susa to Babylon): 'So when a great number of these virgins were gathered together, there was found a damsel in Babylon, whose parents were both dead, and she was brought up with her uncle Mordecai, for that was her

7 B. Grossfeld, trans., *The First Targum to Esther: According to the MS Paris Hebrew 110 of the Bibliotheque Nationale* (New York, NY: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1983), 97.

8 D. J. A. Clines *Esther Scroll*, 220.

9 P. L. Maier, 'Introduction' in F. Josephus, *The Complete Works of Josephus* Revised and Expanded Edition, trans. W. Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 8.

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uncle's name.'[10] In Esther studies, it is often assumed that Josephus' rendering is a matter of merely re-telling one or the other of the extant versions. While the instances wherein he departs from these versions significantly could be explained as his own creativity, there is also a chance that he could have been attesting to a completely independent tradition. The multiplicity of manuscripts and versions as exemplified in the story of Esther and the consequent textual variations made necessary the sort of questioning of biblical texts that rendered the traditional authoritative interpretation as claimed by the author of the Petrine epistle above simply unsustainable. It is for this reason that at the base of biblical criticism are questions relating to the text(s), and where the story of Esther is concerned such questions are plenty.

A word of caution at this point is necessary. I must note that readers' interaction with the printed forms of literature has permeated textual criticism to a point where the unique details of how the ancient text developed have been pushed to the margins. With particular reference to New Testament texts, David C. Parker uses the term 'describing' to mean, in part, a process where the role and contribution of the ancient or original scribe has been completely ignored in textual analysis: '… the New Testament has been described, that the role of the scribe and the priority of the manuscript in the formation and development of the works of which it is composed have been denied.'[11] Still in the realm of New Testament textual scholarship and as an example, Parker notes that focus on the first Greek New Testament translation by Erasmus published in 1516[12] did (and still does) not take into account the fact that '… Erasmus and the other protagonists of the Greek New Testament were so intent on replacing the Latin text with the Greek original, that they did not consider the possibility that a text could be Greek and less original than the Latin.'[13] Parker's observation here rings true where it concerns Esther studies in which the Greek versions are often assumed as inferior and at best copies (and improvements) of the Hebrew 'original'. In David Clines' rendition as an example, first was the Pre-MT edition of the story of Esther, developed into Proto-Masoretic, the MT then the LXX.[14] It is a fact often not considered that the LXX Esther may have witnessed to a text older than the MT version. It is in this context that Emanuel Tov declares as one of the objectives of his book: '… to drive home the realization that [MT] and biblical text are *not* identical concepts. [MT] is only

10 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 11.6.2.

11 D. C. Parker, *Textual Scholarship and the Making of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

12 D. C. Parker, *Textual Scholarship*, 9.

13 D. C. Parker, *Textual Scholarship*, 149 n6.

14 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 140.

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one representative of the greater complex of sources which reflect the biblical text.'[15] This observation has far reaching consequences for Esther studies, that is, the realisation that when all of its best efforts are considered, the object of study has not been and cannot be the original but only copies. Assuming primacy of any version or manuscript will only stand in the way of interpretation.

4 Historical-Critical Methods and the Study of Esther

From around the sixteenth century, new questions began to emerge. It became apparent that even if as near original a text could be established, interpretation would require more than a 'perfect text' (assuming there was ever anything like that). To read a text, information relating to its history was necessary. What were the author's sources? What was the genre in which the text was written and in what setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*) would such genre have been most suitably used? Given that writing was developed much later than the traditions in these ancient texts, are there traceable developmental trends from the oral forms of the said traditions to when they were finally fixed into their written forms? What were the 'editorial' interests of whoever took the responsibility to finalise the text before the reader today? These sort of questions constituted what came to be described as a higher form of interacting with biblical texts (textual criticism being the lower form) and, in their variations became known as the historical-critical methods.

As noted in the introduction above, it is generally accepted that for more than a century the Biblical Hermeneutic enterprise thrived on the use of historical criticism, an approach Fernando Segovia has described as 'the much-beloved scientific method that held sway in academic circles from the early nineteenth century to the third quarter of the twentieth.'[16] Both its proponents and those opposed to it agree that its footprint in biblical studies is indelible. While the strong grip of the approach is fast waning, with voices from the margins questioning its dominance and validity, its legacy still lingers. This study aims to build on the gains made in readings of the story of Esther under the historical critical methods. Admittedly, it is not possible within the scope of this project to exhaust all there is to the study of Esther from the perspectives of all who employed an historical critical approach. For that reason, I will focus

15 E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), xxxviii.

16 F. F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 147.

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primarily on two methods within the approach, namely Literary or Source and Form critical approaches. By doing this, I hope to offer an alternative theory on the trajectory by which the story of Esther can be understood to have reached its 'final' form.

4.1 *A Source Critical Approach to Esther*

In its classical sense, Source (or Literary) Criticism in biblical studies developed from a realisation that, for the most part, biblical narratives are imbued with inconsistencies in style and repetitions in content such as to make the idea of single authorship unsustainable. The nature of biblical material itself calls for source analysis. With particular reference to the use of this approach to the Pentateuch, John Barton notes:

> A work which consists of narrative mixed with poems and hymns and laws, which contain two or even three versions of the same story set down with no apparent awareness that they are the same, and which changes style so drastically from paragraph to paragraph and from verse to verse, cannot in a certain sense be read at all: you simply don't know what to do with it.[17]

Reinhard G. Kratz offers a revised version of the source critical approach to the Pentateuch, and extending to Joshua, in which the presupposition of documentary sources behind the biblical text is very much alive.[18] Where it concerns Esther, the same sort of inconsistencies and repetitions abound. When the various versions of the story of Esther are read together an interpretive challenge similar to the Synoptic Problem in New Testament studies emerges, that is, how to account for the similarities and differences in the narratives. One possibility to explain all this lies in source analysis, which, in biblical studies, 'is a method used in handling texts that have been produced by amalgamating other, older texts.'[19]

In Chapter 1 above, I discussed the frequency of references to 'documents' as part of a literary device employed by the author of Esther to give his work historical credibility. For all it is worth, this reference to other 'documents' to support assertions made in this story can be seen as evidence to at least

17 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1996), 22.

18 R. G. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament* J. Bowden, trans. (London: T&T Clark International, 2005).

19 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 20.

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a consciousness of documentary sources available to the author of this story. While his 1961 article[20] touched on genre, what stands out as Henri Cazelles' cutting edge contribution was on the question of origins:

> … Cazelles opened up a new line of investigation for Esther scholars by suggesting that the Book of Esther was a conflation of two distinct stories. It was in the book's very common phenomenon of "two-ness" that Cazelles found his clue.[21]

The noted abundance of duality in the book of Esther made Cazelles conclude that the author of the book had two complete and independent stories before him; one about Esther and the other about Mordecai. Cazelles offers a thorough analysis of the hypothesis of the existence of independent Mordecai and Esther sources for the MT Esther. For Cazelles identifies two major stories behind the story of Esther, 'one liturgical in character, centred on Esther and primarily concerned … with the provinces, and the other more political or administrative, centred on Susa and Mordecai's victory over Haman.'[22] The Mordecai story would sit very well with other stories about Jewish heroes scoring high successes in foreign royal courts such as Joseph, Moses and Daniel, to name a few. Cazelles has about a dozen points he uses to argue that the story of Esther is in fact an amalgamation of at least two independent stories, covering a number of duplications, inconsistencies and outright contradictions.[23]

Cazelles' theory would explain why, for instance, the Esther narrative has ten sons of Haman being killed twice in such short literary space (9:7–15). First, at the behest of the now powerful Mordecai (9:4) the ten sons of Haman are counted among the massacre on the first day of the campaign against the enemies of the Jews (9:10). It is King Ahasuerus who conveys to Queen Esther the news of the triumph of the Jews in Susa: 'In the citadel of Susa the Jews have killed five hundred people and also the sons of Haman' (9:12). Immediately and within that same conversation Queen Esther requests (and in a manner that implies that events reported took place elsewhere and not in Susa), among other things, that ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows on the morrow (9:13). It is curious to note that each of the four times reference is made to Haman's progeny in the short space of five verses (9:10–14) עשרת בני המן

20 H. Cazelles, 'Note sur la Composition du Rouleau d'Esther' in H. Gross and F. Mussner, eds., *Lex tua veritus: Festschrift für Hubert Junger* (Trier: Paulinas Verlag, 1961), 17–29.

21 C. A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther*, LX.

22 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 115.

23 Taken from D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 115–117.

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(ten sons of Haman), there is no use of the definite article, a fact that does not preclude entertaining the possibility of Haman having more than twenty sons. If that were the case, Mordecai and Esther would have demanded a different set of ten of Haman's sons from the many he had. However, it seems more plausible to infer that the killing of עשרת בני המן is consistent with the notion לאבד (to annihilate) as set by Haman himself for the Jews (3:13) and remembered by Esther at the occasion of the final of her banquets (7:4). While I will discuss the connection below, it must be noted here that it is not farfetched to infer that [the] ten sons are all Haman had. This would provide the corrective contrast to 1 Samuel 15 where Mordecai's (and Esther's) ancestor Saul spared the life of Haman's ancestor Agag in direct contravention of the command of יהוה to לאבד the Amelekites (1 Samuel 15:3).[24] It is indeed plausible to think of the demise of Haman's sons as remembered differently in the sources before the final redactor of the book of Esther. That each instance of [the] עשרת בני המן dying is at the command and request of Mordecai and Esther respectively, each clearly oblivious of the other, further strengthens postulation on independent Mordecai and Esther sources behind the story.

Hans Bardtke took this idea further by suggesting that the author of Esther had access to not just the two stories identified by Cazelles but rather a collection of stories about many heroes and heroines including Vashti, each complete in itself.[25] Viewing Vashti as a heroine and not a villain is a result of some retrieval process. The instruction of King Ahasuerus to 'bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold' (Esther 1:11) is at best ambiguous. Where instances of attire and dress are given elsewhere in the story, the author is very generous in detail. For instance, 'Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple …' (Esther 8:15). A possible reading is that in Esther 1:11 the demand was for the Queen to come before the king and his company wearing only the crown. As is prevalent in retrieval hermeneutics of suspicion in current feminist discourse, Vashti could have been cast positively originally as a heroine who stood up against the demand of a drunken king bent on degrading a woman, showing her off as one of his many possessions. Adele Berlin notes of the characterisation of Vashti:

24 A. Wetter, 'How Jewish is Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish? Tracing Ethnic and Religious Identity in a Diaspora Narrative', *ZAW* 123 (2011), 596–603, 602.

25 S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* SBL Dissertation Series (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 4.

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> Modern readers, especially feminists, tend to view her positively, as a woman who resisted male domination and was victimised by it. The biblical Vashti can be interpreted as a character with an independent spirit and a desire to maintain her dignity in the face of her husband's loss of his own dignity.[26]

The negative characterisation of Vashti in the story of Esther is only because of a male dominated stereotype. Within the same framework of feminist and resistance hermeneutics, Timothy Beal remarks: '… I have read Vashti as a (non-Jewish) heroine in a gender-based conflict within a very vulnerable patriarchal order.'[27] Postulating the existence of a tradition in literary form predating Esther that viewed Vashti positively is not at all unreasonable. For Bardtke, bringing together the story of Vashti and that of Esther who used her beauty and wit to tame a foolish king into a story of romance would have been not so difficult. In a context of male dominance that the docile traits of Esther would be preferred to those of a rather rebellious and spirited Vashti is predictable and it would be expected that Esther would come out triumphant. Bardtke theorises that it is this Vashti-Esther story that is then merged with another independent story cast in the mould of the Joseph circle featuring the hero Mordecai who outwits the villain Haman in court tales. With romantic drama providing a reason for the Vashti-Esther amalgamation, the stories of Mordecai find their way into the growing corpus for political reasons. A reason for combining the independent stories of Esther (and Vashti) with those of Mordecai can be inferred as Susan Berg suggests: 'In both the Mordecai and Esther stories, the protagonists succeed in averting a persecution of their people, perhaps indicating one reason for their conflation into a single account.'[28] While the existence of such documents is only a matter of conjecture, the idea was planted that the author of the book of Esther worked with complete separate narratives, and what remained then was to theorise on how these various documents were brought together into the story of Esther as we have received it in its various versions.

As stated in Chapter 1 above, in a 1984 publication, David Clines develops a theory explaining how the story of Esther could have come into being and developed along varying strands of tradition culminating in the multiple

26 A. Berlin, Esther: *The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 14.

27 T. K. Beal, 'Tracing Esther's Beginnings' in A. Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 107.

28 S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 4.

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manuscripts and versions by which it has come to be known. In summation, Clines utilises the gains of source critical approach to Esther studies and suggests the following order: first are independent stories about heroes, heroines and villains in circulation. These stories start to come together, connecting on the basis of thematic congruence to form the Pre-MT version of Esther. Some improvements on the Pre-MT version of Esther from just simple stories to an amalgamation of sorts into a coherent single unit lead to what Clines calls the Proto-MT Esther. Here the heroes and heroines (and the villains) of the independent stories are brought into a plot and narrative relationships. Seemingly mundane details such as a king given to partying, a disobedient queen, and trusted gatekeepers plotting assassination are harmonised to form a neat introduction. It is from Proto-MT Esther that different traditions developed the versions available today or the ones they presuppose. It is the improved version of the Proto-MT Esther that is then 'translated and supplemented by major Semitic and Greek Additions to form … the Septuagint story.'[29] In this arrangement the LXX version of Esther is merely a translation of the Hebrew version that anticipated the MT version (given that the LXX predates the MT) interspaced with the Semitic and Greek Additions. I will now discuss these stages in some detail.

4.1.1 Pre-Masoretic Text Esther

On the basis of Henri Cazelles' theory of independent Mordecai and Esther stories as discussed above, David Clines suggests an initial stage in the development of the story of Esther which he calls the Pre-Masoretic Text (Pre-MT) Esther. Clines suggests that Pre-MT Esther predated two major strands in which it was developed differently, namely, Proto-MT and Proto-AT.[30] His argument is that the Greek AT Esther attests to the latter old 'textual ancestor'. There may have been traditional stories about a Jewish orphan of star-quality beauty who, by use of her beauty and charm, was able to manipulate a Persian king and saved her kindred from certain danger. Stories of a similar nature may have circulated about a man of Jewish descent whose mercurial rise in foreign royal court setting left him a target of envy and a victim in the ensuing court intrigues. As in the case of heroes of stories of a similar form: Joseph, Moses, Daniel; the hero in the stories of Pre-MT Esther comes out triumphant against all odds and securing a stay of execution for all Jews threatened by the evil villain. A perception of Mordecai as a 'righteous' man must have been commonplace, more in the mould of Tal Davidovich's *Resh Galuta* in respect of Esther

29 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 139.

30 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 93.

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as discussed in Chapter 1 above.[31] He put his life in danger by standing up for his identity as a Jew and manoeuvred with utmost wit to save his people from the snare set by his rival in the court drama, Haman. As discussed above, Hans Bardtke broadened the source base to include stories about Vashti.[32] There is no reason to stop at the stories about a beautiful queen who disobeyed her husband the king. We may as well imagine existence of stories about a foolish king given to partying and getting drunk, a king who was always surrounded by court officials who would have their opinions carried out by selling them cheap to a king who was so foolish that he seemed unable to form ideas of his own, trusted doormen who contemplated getting rid of such a stupid king and many other stories. All of these stories need not have been complete tales, simply bits and pieces flying around independently, perhaps with different names for the leading characters. The bits and pieces and the initial coming together of these, form what can be called the Pre-MT Esther edition.

4.1.2 Proto-Masoretic Text Esther

In a recent publication, James VanderKam has asserted: 'Except for one, every book in the Hebrew Bible is represented by at least one fragment among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the missing one is, of course, the book of Esther.'[33] This assertion represents a widely held opinion in biblical scholarship with several implications to Esther studies. The overall effect is that Esther, in any form or version, was either not yet in existence when the Qumran community of the Essenes is believed to have thrived well into the second century CE or was not of interest to this community. However, reference to 13 Adar as 'the day before Mordecai's day' (2 Maccabees 15:36), even with a late dating of this document and Josephus' re-telling in *Jewish Antiquities*, point to the fact that a tradition core to the story of Esther must have already been in circulation within the last two centuries BCE. It can be argued that the fact that there is no evidence of the canonical book of Esther found at Qumran *yet* is not evidence that there was none. However, continuing to hope to finding Esther at Qumran is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain as Eliezer Segal notes:

> As long as a large portion of the scrolls remained unclassified and unpublished, it was possible to argue that the anomaly was only temporary, and

31 T. Davidovich, *Esther, Queen of the Jews: The Status and Position of Esther in the Old Testament* (Winona Lakes, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 123–131 as discussed in Chapter 1 above.

32 H. Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther* Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), 248–252.

33 J. C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 2, an assertion repeated on pages 55 and 72.

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> that Esther fragments would eventually surface among newly identified texts. However, in recent years, as the pace of publication has accelerated, the situation has not changed, and we are no closer than ever to a solution.[34]

In any case, an argument from absence is indeed least persuasive. The question is that if ever the book of Esther was part of the Qumran library why should it take this long to find when every other book in the Hebrew Bible has already been attested.

The work of J. T. Milik on the fragments found in 4Q550 necessitates reconsideration of such assertions as the ones foregoing. In summary, Geza Vermes describes Milik's work this way:

> A number of badly damaged fragments of an Aramaic writing report events said to have occurred in the Persian court, thus recalling the biblical story of Esther. The script is dated to the second half of the first century BCE. J. T. Milik, in a very learned, but equally conjectural manner, has reconstructed the background of the narrative, even restoring the name of Esther from an incomplete word with the letters *aleph* and *samekh.* He has thus discovered an Aramaic *model* of Esther at Qumran, although no remains of the canonical Book of Esther have so far been found there.[35]

It is true that some portions of the Hebrew Bible have been found in perfect or near perfect condition in the Qumran discovery of 1947. However, given the conditions under which these manuscripts were preserved and the unknown extant level of each manuscript the community owned, to expect a full version of every canonical text would be a matter of expecting too much in my view. With particular reference to Esther, Milik's 'conjectural manner' as remarked by Vermes above is echoed by Eliezer Segal who makes note of the frustration of not finding names from the canonical Esther story in the reconstructed Qumran text: 'Prof. Milik, in his determination to establish a connection with Esther, was not above forcibly inserting appropriate names into his text.'[36] That weakness notwithstanding, there are striking similarities of narrative detail to warrant some textual relationship with the story of Esther.

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34 E. Segal, *In Those Days, At This Time: Holiness and History in the Jewish Calendar* (Calgary, CA: Calgary University Press, 2007), 139.

35 G. Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 619.

36 E. Segal, *In Those Days*, 141.

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As far back as 1944, Charles C. Torrey published an article in which he argued that, among other things, the extant Greek versions of Esther descended from and attested to a tradition initially written in Aramaic. This is a conclusion arrived at to account for the manner in which the Greek versions of Esther depart significantly from their Hebrew equivalent:

> The principal Greek version of Esther has no counterpart in the books of the Greek Old Testament, in its disregard of the Hebrew text. While it tells the same story, and consequently agrees closely and very often verbally with the Hebrew version where the narrative is the same, yet the fact is conspicuous that it bears no such relation to the canonical text as is the case in every other book of the so-called "Septuagint".[37]

The presumption that an Aramaic version of the story of Esther existed before the Common Era is a notion that finds support in the referred findings of Cave 4, manuscript 4Q550. An Aramaic fragment dated to the second half of the first century BCE has been reconstructed as:

> The Most High whom you (Jews) fear and worship rules o[ver the whole e]arth. Everyone whom He wishes (comes) near. Bagasro … Whoever speaks an evil word against Bagasro [will be] put to death for there is no-o[ne to destroy h]is good for [e]ver….[38]

One of the significant differences between the tradition preserved in the Greek versions of Esther and that in the Hebrew canonical version is that in the former יהוח, the God of Israel, features with prominence while in the latter יהוח is conspicuously absent. It has been generally assumed that the Greek versions, being secondary and much later, simply made additions to a Hebrew version that was the *Vorlage* of MT Esther. To find an Aramaic version dated before the CE attesting to a tradition that had the 'God of the Jews' already a part of the story goes to show that what we have in the Greek versions are not mere additions but rather part of a long standing tradition parallel or at least different from that of the Hebrew canonical version.

37 C. C. Torrey, 'The Older Book of Esther' in *Harvard Theological Review* 37 (1944), 1–40 taken from a reprint in C. A. Moore *Studies in the Book of Esther*, 450.

38 G. Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, 620.

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4.2 *A Form Critical Approach to Esther*

It is my contention that to ask questions of conformity to historiographical concerns, especially as it relates to modern day historiography, would be a matter of asking the wrong questions. Yet that seems to be the preoccupation of many scholars of Esther as Yehuda Radday noted that the 'many commentaries written on it deal with historicity and historical background …'[39] The reason why consensus on such issues as identity of the author, date and place of composition and many other history-based questions will remain evasive, in my opinion, is because the story is not concerned with history in the first place. One way to go round this impasse has been to look at the form in which the story is written, hoping that by so doing it can be read with other stories with which it shares literary form. When compared to the Joseph narrative, among other stories, there are striking similarities that can be explained only in terms of 'direct interdependence and borrowing'[40] and a general agreement on structure of content. The book of Esther is in form folklore, as Susan Niditch notes:

> In fact, the book of Esther appears to be the most obvious candidate for folkloristic approaches. Its characters seem to be drawn from a veritable motif index of treacherous villains, fair maidens of lowly status who become wives of kings, upright and wise heroes, stupid and ineffectual kings.[41]

Establishing the exact point in the time range stretching from the Persian period to the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt against the Hellenistic Seleucids (167–160 BCE) will not aid much our understanding of the book if the argument that the story is a folklore can be sustained. If the story of Esther belongs to the genre of folklore then questions of date, authorship and purpose become less important when compared to questions of form and structure where it concerns the book's interpretation.

Herman Gunkel distinguishes folktales from myths by the fact that in the former 'the figures of the great gods are still not yet present'[42] and acknowledges that 'in the folktales handed down to us by a later period the gods have forced their way in, here and there, without the nature of the story being

39 Y. T. Radday, 'Esther with Humour' in Y. T. Radday and A. Brenner, eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 295.

40 S. Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority' in A. Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 26.

41 S. Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority', 28.

42 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 29.

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otherwise changed.'[43] If Esther can be accepted as a folktale, the much talked about absence of God in the MT version would find explanation here in that the source(s) behind this version were still at that stage before gods had found their way into the story to take the roles originally assigned to human beings. John Barton describes folklore as 'narrative material that has been transmitted orally in traditional cultures'[44] In that process of transmission, the said narrative material takes turns and twists as it is re-told by people in different times and places. The variations in how the same story may be told is a result of local communities re-telling the same tale with local tint. Patricia G. Kirkpatrick refers to a study that 'followed the careers of story-tellers over several decades [and] have demonstrated the considerable change which is involved in each retelling of the stories.'[45] Gunkel traced the origins of the folktale to dreams and visions embodying 'some wish or other of primitive humankind; such 'boulamatic [sic] folktales' depict as reality what in hard life could, of course, only remain an unattainable desire.'[46] While Gunkel discussed folklore as a specific form definitive of much of the biblical narrative,[47] Barton paid attention to type and structure and located the linking of folktales to biblical studies within the new approach of Structural Criticism.[48] Similarities in structure, form and content can be explained on the basis of the fact that the aspirations of human beings may be the same, which is why 'folk-tales are a great problem for any critic who wishes to argue that meaning always requires someone to mean it, for it is clear that most folk-tales have some kind of existence which transcends any given version of them.'[49] In a discussion of the similarities between folktale and myth, Eva M. Thury and Margaret K. Devinney stress the fact that these are genres that are transmitted orally with the obvious implication that 'they change and evolve'.[50] Utilising discussions in the Jewish Rabbinic traditions, Barton suggests that arguments relating to which biblical texts did not defile hands such as Esther was not about their sanctity but rather about the fact that they were narratives meant to be recited and not read.[51] The multiple versions of the story of Esther, their variations and similarities are not

43 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 29–30.
44 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 114.
45 P. G. Kirkpatrick, *The Old Testament and Folklore Study* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 117.
46 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 30.
47 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 33–36.
48 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 114–116.
49 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 114.
50 E. M. Thury, *Introduction to Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths* 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 547.
51 J. Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel After the Exile* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), 68–72.

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at all peculiar if the argument that in this story we are working with a folktale can be sustained.

The devastating nature of the Babylonian conquest of the early sixth century BCE is well attested in biblical traditions as in the poetic expression of the Psalmist:

> By the rivers of Babylon –
> there we sat down and there we wept
> when we remembered Zion.
> On the willows there
> we hang up our harps.
> For there our captors
> asked us for songs,
> and our tormentors asked for mirth saying,
> "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
>
> How can we sing the Lord's song
> in a foreign land?
> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
> let my right hand wither!
> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
> if I do not remember you,
> if I do not set Jerusalem
> above my highest joy.
>
> PSALM 137:1–6

While communities such as the ones associated with Ezra and Nehemiah kept the hope of restoration, there are others that must have resigned themselves to the finality of their condition and, in Jon Levenson's terms, transformed exile into diaspora.[52] For communities such as the one behind the story of Esther, the desire for recognition and honour by a powerful overlord whose domination was accepted as permanent must have been a key constituent element of what defined their collective wish. Beyond the Babylonian exile, the story of Esther could find meaning and speak to the wishes of several communities within the context of any of the subsequent overlords, Persian, Greek or even Roman empires. The trappings of the story seem to suggest that it is a folktale hence Niditch's observation cited above. Asking questions about history and date of authorship is likely to yield very little.

52 J. D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 16.

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Folktales are known to be built around particular motifs and roles. John Barton makes reference to the work of one Russian form critic, Vladimir Propp, who, on the basis of hundreds of Russian folktales that he studied, argued that 'it is possible to reduce all the characters who appear in folk-tales to a finite number of types or 'roles', each defined by its relation to the others.'[53] Finnish folklorists, Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, offered a more technical discussion of folklore; studying thousands of folktales attempting to establish some code of index of motifs and their arrangement assigning each type or motif a number.[54] In a more recent publication, Thury and Devinney discuss in greater detail the classification of motifs in folklore.[55] These types become sort of rules that only poorly written folktales would break. For instance, as I will discuss below, it would be not permissible by the type of role in which she is cast that Esther would not win the beauty contest the same way it is inconceivable in the Cinderella story that the prince would end up with one of the evil twins instead of Cinderella. That the suggested recurring motifs such as in the few examples discussed below find expression in the story of Esther, buttresses the argument that the story belongs to the genre of folklore. I now turn to give a few examples.

4.2.1 The 'Cinderella' Motif

One motif that finds expression in modern-day (albeit traditional) stories such as that of Cinderella as alluded to above, is some variation of a heroine who, being an orphaned beautiful maid, wins the heart of a powerful rich prince or ruler against more worthy competitors.[56] This is the case because, as Gunkel put it: 'It is also part of the folktale king's glory that he himself is the most magnificent and splendid among the people (1 Sam. 9.2; 10.23) and that his consort is the most beautiful in the kingdom.'[57] The odds are stacked against her but the reader is given sufficient pointers to route for the heroine. The stories of this form have a typical fairy tale ending of 'and they lived happily ever after'. Esther's inclusion in the beauty pageant in search of a new queen for Persia poses challenges for an interpreter who wishes to reconcile the story with what is known of Persia at the time. Historical sources of worth on Persia tell of how Darius, upon the death of Cambyses, travelled ahead of the army to reach Persia and formed a tight conspiracy of the seven highest noble families

53 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 115.

54 A. Aarne and S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale, Folklore Fellows Communications 184* 2nd ed., (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1964).

55 E. M. Thury, *Introduction to Mythology*, 547–566.

56 S. Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority', 36.

57 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 154.

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of the Persian Empire known as the Seven Great Houses from which the queen of Persia would be chosen always, with the Achaemenid family as chief.[58] With their support, Darius managed to kill Gautama, Cambyses' brother and the heir apparent, and ascended to the throne, effectively establishing an oligarchy.[59] It must be noted here that 'Persian ethnicity became an important prerequisite for all top administrative posts throughout the empire's history.'[60] It is clear then that neither Mordecai nor Haman would qualify for the posts they are said to have held in the plot, nor could the king have married an unknown immigrant. In the argument of Bush as already cited above, this is the sort of detail the author of the book of Esther must have been aware of. The detail we are given about Esther, Mordecai, Haman and the relationships that emerge in the story of Esther go beyond mere fiction in my view, conforming to a type true to folktale.

4.2.2 The Powerful Buffoon Motif

Within the opening verse of the MT version of Esther, the extent of Ahasuerus' power is expressed: '… who ruled over one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia' (Esther 1:1). Logic requires that to establish an empire this vast and to amass the kind of wealth such as shown further down, the king and leader must have been a person of above-average intelligence. Reading further into the book shows a well-developed legal system known as דת, an elaborate postal system by which edicts where distributed throughout the vast empire and a political administrative system way ahead of its time – all these supporting the assumption that at the helm of such a system must have been a very talented figure. In discussing folklore as a literary form in the Old Testament, Herman Gunkel spoke of a folklorist category that cast the king as an ordinary person.[61] In a world where the king was considered above mere mortals in wisdom, valour and bravery, that was no mean feat. In the infancy stages of the institution of the monarchy in the ancient Near East, kings were perceived as appendages of the gods, holding on to power and legitimising their authority by claiming to be the representatives of the divine realm to the people. In some cases, they claimed to be divine themselves, like the deification of the Pharaoh in Egypt and Emperor Worship in Rome. At this point in time, the line separating kings from gods is blurred. For instance, in the ancient

58 Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1:107–130.

59 L. Allen, *The Persian Empire: A History* (London: The British Museum Press, 2005), 42.

60 J. L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 52.

61 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 160.

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Mesopotamian deluge epic, Gilgamesh is portrayed as a godly being,[62] yet as Norman K. Sandars notes, it has been established 'beyond doubt that a man, a king, named Gilgamesh lived and ruled in Uruk at some time during the first half of the third millennium.'[63] The material here cited is admittedly mythical yet important in that it provides a glimpse into the earliest understandings of the monarchy. Dale Launderville aptly notes: 'Royal authority in the ancient Near East was revered as a gift from the gods to increase the well-being of the community by strengthening the quality of relationships between the ruler and the ruled.'[64] The perception then was that the monarchy was serving the gods, a perception that rendered 'a purely secular approach to kingship hardly possible.'[65] The book of Esther's presentation of Ahasuerus goes beyond mere 'mortalisation' of the king, making him 'a fop and fool.'[66] Even the Greek historians who are known to have looked at everything Persian with naked disdain were not as harsh in their overall presentation of Persian royalty.[67] The exaggerations of the king's stupidity in the book of Esther is true not to logic or history but again to type. There is the form of the king who matches what he has in power and authority with the same proportion in stupidity and vanity.

4.2.3 The Assured Triumph of Good over Evil Motif

Related to the foregoing is the folklorist form where having been reduced to a mere mortal, the king becomes vulnerable to deception and falls to the clutches of a clearly defined villain. The motif is one where a benevolent king is manipulated to act harshly against the folktale's innocent hero, heroine and/or his or her entire community. In such stories, the king is spared the reader's wrath, as he is clearly a victim together with the hero. When Potiphar is angry with Joseph, believing him to have attempted rape or sexual assault on his wife,

62 Myths like the *Enuma Elish* include details of gods in combat, killing each other. The anthropomorphism of Gilgamesh's quest for immortality in the Mesopotamian deluge epic is dwarfed by his superhuman strength and the feats he achieved.

63 N. K. Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 20.

64 D. Launderville, Piety and Politics: *The Dynamics of Royal Authority in Homeric Greece, Biblical Israel, and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

65 L. M. Muntingh, 'The Conception of Ancient Syro-Palestinian Kingship in the Light of Contemporary Royal Archives with Special Reference to the Recent Discoveries at Tell Mardikh (Ebla) in Syria' in H. I. H. Prince T. Mikasa, ed., *Monarchies and Socio-Religious Traditions in the Ancient Near East* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984), 1.

66 R. Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants: The Biblical Assault on Kings and Kingship* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 125.

67 For instance Herodotus, saw the world population as comprising of the 'Hellenes' on the one hand and 'Barbarians' on the other, the former wise and superior and the rest as stupid and inferior.

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and throwing him into prison as a result, the reader understands that the actions of the magnanimous figure of authority are not his fault but that of the deceptive evil wife (Genesis 39:19–23). The reader is given detail that the king does not have. Stories of this type always end in the same way where just in time, the king knows the plot of the villain and evil is averted. In the same way, Ahasuerus can be forgiven for wanting to inflict extreme suffering on the hero Mordecai and his kindred, and all fury can be directed at the real villain Haman. The reader knows more of Haman's plot than the king and may actually feel sorry for the king. This form conforms to the ideal of assured victory of good over evil.

4.2.4 The Successful Jew at a Foreign Royal Court Motif

Having made reference to the Joseph story already, within biblical narrative, one folklorist motif that features with prominence is that of a Jewish hero faring exceptionally well in a foreign royal court, fighting against a powerful and ruthless adversary. It is a theme well explored in the work of Lawrence Mitchel Wills published in 1990.[68] Apart from the story of Joseph, we are told of the exploits of such heroes as Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Mordecai who each managed to access the kernel of a foreign king's emotions and changed a bad situation for the better for their own people, Israel. As will be shown below, Thomas Römer labels all these narratives 'diaspora novels' with 2 Kings 25:27–30 as the primary template.[69] With the hero in prison or some state of certain danger, presentation of such stories ideally begins by painting 'a mission impossible' scenario to exaggerate the sense of relief when the hero comes out triumphant in the end. It must be noted here that the type of folktales built around 'the wise courtier' and indexed as 922 by Aarne and Thompson cited above, extended beyond ancient Israel as W. Lee Humphreys notes:

> The discovery of an Aramaic version of the tale of Aḥiqar among the papyrus remains of the Jewish military colony at Elephantine in Egypt indicates that such tales of courtiers and court intrigue were popular even if they did not involve Jewish figures.[70]

68 L. M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990).

69 T. Römer, 'From Deuteronomistic History to Nebiim and Torah' in I. Himbaza, ed., *Making the Biblical Text: Textual Studies in the Hebrew and the Greek Bible* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 8.

70 W. L. Humphreys, 'A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 92, No. 2 (Jun., 1973), pp. 211–223, 213.

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That a copy of the story of a non-Jewish courtier would be found here does not only attest to the popularity of the type but also points to the likelihood that authors of Jewish stories of the same type had access to tales of similar nature from their neighbours and beyond. In the Jewish rendering of such type, except in the case of Mordecai, the reader expects victory because the hero is given as of exceptional piety working under the direct counsel of the all-powerful God, יהוה. In Pauline rendering, 'If God is for us, who is against us? … in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (Romans 8:31–39). Those that dare raise their hand against the elect of God do so only at their own peril. Haman's own wife, Zeresh, was perceptive enough to express the motif unfolding for the reader; 'If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him' (Esther 6:13). The villain is fighting a losing battle and the reader can relax in the knowledge that the hero is safe.

• • •

The foregoing shows that by paying attention to the form, structure, types and motifs of the story of Esther, classifying its core within the folklore genre is a reasonable option. To use John Barton's definition of folktale above, while employing detail from actual historical experience, the author of Esther was preoccupied not with historical credibility, but rather, gathering narrative material that had been transmitted orally in his own traditional culture.[71] He then used the said narrative material, according to Gunkel, in pursuit of the dreams and wishes of his people.[72] The author achieved this by anchoring popular folklore in concrete historical circumstances. Referring to the book of Esther as a historical novel or historical fiction as is the case with Joyce Baldwin[73] is, in my opinion, a fallacy committed in the process of trying to deal with the unusual occurrence of the two polarities of folktale and history in such close proximity. Reading the story of Esther as a folktale takes away the pressure of wanting to establish the exact identity of the author, date and purpose of writing.

71 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 114.

72 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 30.

73 J. G. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 17.

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5 Re-defining the Centre: Foregrounding a Diaspora Reading

There are two major related weaknesses with the foregoing discussion. First is the fact that for the most part, we are faced with a methodological crisis in that we seem to be reading an ancient text with modern lenses. In Parker's observation, paying attention to documentary sources lying behind the versions we now have, and developing theories based on little more than mere conjecture, belong more to our modern world than that of the text before us. The text came into existence in a manner not fully retrievable to the modern world. When pressed further, there is very little to show of the plethora of documentary sources behind the texts available to us. Thus, the second weakness can be put as an excessive preoccupation with documentary sources, a weakness that can be said to apply to source criticism in general. Faced with three or more documents that in some ways are so similar yet in some other ways so different, for the modern mind the explanation must be sought in documentary sources. Yet we know that in antiquity things were quite different. Oral tradition carried considerable weight and in a context devoid of the current proliferation of documented data it was pretty commonplace in antiquity to commit huge chunks of tradition to memory. There is nothing to conclusively rule out the possibility that there was a story of Esther that took a life of its own in the communities behind the respective versions in circulation today. It is unlikely that keys to interpreting the story of Esther lie in how it developed as attested in the plethora of manuscripts and versions. If only it can be established with some respectable probability what the story was about primarily, then will it be possible to offer a reading with a chance of commanding some degree of acceptance.

This enquiry acknowledges the rather obvious fact that the epistemological principles informing historiography have gone through tremendous change since Esther came into being. It is for that reason that we have not engaged fully in the debate on the Book's historical accuracy. We note that the tendency to mix fact and fiction is widespread in Hebrew texts as writers were at liberty to re-arrange historical detail and fill-in narrative gaps to achieve their intentions. In identifying independent Esther and Mordecai sources behind the story of Esther, Henri Cazelles distinguished the two sources by their primary focus. As noted in Chapter 1 above, the Esther source was perceived as concerned with matters of worship and liturgy and had, for its arena, the provinces. To read Esther as a liturgical text for Purim has justification in that at least one of its main sources was concerned with matters of ritual, festivity and worship. However, the Mordecai source, centred at the citadel of Susa, had a more political outlook following on the intrigues of the Persian court. If it were

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not for the political tension between Mordecai and Haman, then there would have been no story to tell. In its final form, the story of Esther seems to be a political story essentially.

While that acknowledgement takes away the pressure to prove the historicity of the details of the story, it is curious how the story renders the figure of Ahasuerus. Identifying Ahasuerus and the fourth monarch of the Persian Empire called Xerxes in traditions that have descended in Greek has commanded reasonable acceptance. Why the author of Esther would leave the identity of a figure so central to the plot of his narrative a matter needing decipherment[74] begs the question of the intention of the author of Esther. Marking time with kings and events in their lives was common even then, such that identifying which particular Persian king with clarity should not have been much of a chore if it was what the author of the story desired. For example, proto-Isaiah dates the call of the prophet 'in the year that King Uzziah died' (Isaiah 6:1). It can be argued that the confusion may have been caused by the way in which the Persian Xshayarsha was pronounced in Hebrew. However, given the importance of the person of Ahasuerus in the plot of Esther and the fact that he was royalty, it is rather doubtful that a loss in transliteration would sufficiently explain the cursory manner in which his character is rendered in the story. To explain that anomaly there is need to consider the possibility that this was linked to a deep-seated attitude to human monarchy on the part of the author of Esther, reducing human royalty to a nonentity. For such an argument to make sense, it must be taken in tandem with other factors to which I now turn.

5.1 *Liberating* יהוה *from the Clutches of Human Royalty*

There are a number of elements that stand out in the MT version of Esther and three can be said to have received considerable attention. First is the absence of the name of God, a feature so conspicuous in the effort the author puts to this end. It would seem like reference to God by name or otherwise was some kind of a taboo. Even where it would have been easy to explain certain events by positing God behind them, the author of Esther elects to let mere coincidence suffice. The wailing, ashes, sack cloths (Esther 4:1) and Esther's call for a fast (Esther 4:16) often have been stretched to point to God playing some role in the story. All these efforts read like just overstretching the evidence, as it is clear that the intention on the part of the author of MT Esther in particular was to edit יהוה out of the story. The second element is the lack of interest in the 'holy land'; not only is the story told as unfolding out of the

74 L. B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, 53.

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bounds of Eretz Israel but no reference is made to it whatsoever. Comparable in this regard within the Hebrew Bible canon is the story of Daniel, but here at least reference to the 'holy land' is made when Daniel is said to have prayed in his house 'which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem' (Daniel 6:10). When read against the backdrop of Cyrus' policy to return Babylonian exiles to their lands (a detail to be attended to in Chapter 3 below), not mentioning the land of Israel must only have been deliberate. Third is the absence of a desire for the restoration of the monarchy. The story ends with Esther firmly established as the queen of Persia and Mordecai as king Ahasuerus' viceroy with no indication that he would ever take over. Thomas Römer reads 2 Kings 25:27–30 as a very late addition in the Persian period, setting the paradigm for diaspora novels:

> The rehabilitation of king Jehoiachin who becomes a privileged guest of the Babylonian king but stays second to the king in Babylonia "all the days of his life" can be read as a short story that tells the transition from Exile to Diaspora, as can be shown by the narrative parallels that exists between 2 Kings 25:27–30 and the Diaspora novels, like the story of Esther and Mordecai, Joseph and the narratives in the first part of the book of Daniel. In all these texts an exiled person is brought out of prison, becomes in a way second to the king … and the accession to this new status is symbolized by changing of clothes …[75]

The construction of a diaspora identity included having to make sense of the discernible permanence of the exilic condition. Restoration of the sovereignty of biblical Israel's monarchy was becoming less likely, while the rising of Jewish heroes to position of 'second to the king' in lands away from Eretz Israel was becoming a more viable dream.

The hope for political restoration enshrined in the eschatological *messiah* was alive well into New Testament times. Having believed Jesus to be the Christ in Peter's declaration 'You are the Messiah, Son of the living God' (Mark 8:29, Matthew 16:16), the disciples are evidently disoriented by his death. One of the fundamental questions in post-resurrection interaction is this: 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?' (Acts 1:6). The author of Esther must have been aware of that yearning too. To end the story with 'the high honour of Mordecai' (Esther 10:2) without pursuing the theme of restoration of the land and the kingdom any further could only have been deliberate. The land was always understood as a gift from God in the promise to the

75 T. Römer, 'From Deuteronomistic History to Nebiim and Torah', 8.

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forefathers as enshrined in the creedal formulation of Deuteronomy 26:1–11 to which I have already referred. While audacious in some sense, Norman C. Habel aptly captures the value of land and its ownership for the biblical Jews: 'Land, after all, is such a comprehensive symbol in the Old Testament that it could be ranked next to God in importance.'[76] Its loss at the occasion of the Babylonian exile must have caused more than just mere discomfort but also necessitated an overhaul of how biblical Israel would conceptualise and relate with יהוה. As Paul Joyce reads prophetic traditions in the immediate aftermath of the Babylonian conquest, biblical Israel needed new theological reflections in its new state of landlessness: 'The primary task of the prophet Ezekiel (like that of his prophetic contemporary, Jeremiah) was to provide a theological interpretation of the disaster which was engulfing the nation.'[77] One cannot overemphasise the undesirability of the situation and the need to develop a theology that absolved יהוה of any blame. In his analysis of Ezekiel's prophetic theology, Joyce discerns a tendency to apportion blame 'especially upon the leaders and, more specifically, upon the royal leaders of the nation.'[78] While the fall of the Babylonian Empire (or just Nebuchadnezzar's dynasty) in about a generation at the hands of Cyrus the Great represented some hope for biblical Israel, that hope must have been completely nonexistent by the time Esther was written. Esther must have come into being when the "holy land" was, in a sense, derelict and ancient Israel's claim to it in tatters, because ancient Israel would never fully recover from the fatality of the Babylonian exile. The question then would have been whether יהוה had reneged on his promise to the ancestors. We have demonstrated that one important element of the conceptualisation of the monarchy was the close association between the king and god(s). In a context such as this, to associate the fortunes of the monarchy and God is quite easy. Put differently, the theological questions following the trauma of exile must have revolved around the relationship between a living God, יהוה, and a dead monarchy.

It must be emphasised then that conspicuously absent in ancient Israel's confessional and creedal traditions regarding the Promised Land, deliverance from bondage, wondering in the wilderness, conquest and occupation of the land are traditions relating to the institution of the monarchy. Attempts to read the traditions of the monarchy back into the Torah were unsuccessful as the

76 N. C. Habel, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 6.

77 P. Joyce, 'King and Messiah in Ezekiel' in J. Day, ed., *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East* JSOTSup 270 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 323.

78 P. Joyce, 'King and Messiah in Ezekiel', 323.

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"Law of the King" (Deuteronomy 17:14–20) demonstrates that it still was left as an unnecessary institution.[79] Walter Brueggemann reads this as a reflection of 'what must have been a strongly held view among theological conservatives in ancient Israel who greatly feared centralized government.'[80] In Esther, the loss of land does not say anything about יהוה, yet everything about the monarchy. Persian royalty chosen as the background of the story is arguably the most powerful monarchy around. Robert Gnuse describes Esther's portrayal of Ahasuerus in terms of 'fop and fool'[81] and Levenson saw the entire book as a farce on royal power.[82] Thus, if such a powerful monarchy could be so comically stupid as personified by king Ahasuerus for the most part of the Book, what would this imply for ancient Israel's own monarchy which now lay in ruins or at best only second to that of Babylon (2 Kings 25:27–30) and subsequently Persia (Esther 10:3)? The author of Esther seems to be saying that losing the land was inherent in ancient Israel's request for a human king and when the story is told יהוה has to be left out of it. Mordecai is the personification of an acceptance that only יהוה is King. The outlook and fortunes of the Persian royal court change considerably with Mordecai's inclusion in the administrative structures (Esther 10), as if by including Mordecai the Persians acknowledge the kingship of יהוה he personified.

5.2 *Oversubscription of Royal Terminology*

Having decided to annihilate the Jews and plotted to trick the king into authorising his decision, all that remained for Haman was to decide on a date when the Jews would meet their fate. 'In the first month, which is the month of Nissan … they cast Pur – which means "the lot" – for the day and for the month …' (Esther 3:7). The timing of the genocide was thus decided. Of the eight times the root פור occurs in Esther, this is one of only two times it appears not in reference to 'the institution and regulation of the festival.'[83] Yet the dominant view in reading the book of Esther as has already been pointed out is that Esther has come down to us to explain the origins and proceeding-stipulations for the Purim festival. The fact that in practice to this day, Jews have read the Book in celebration of this festival has helped to buttress the idea that the story is little more than a mere aetiology for this merry-making Jewish holiday.

79 A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, R. A. Wilson, trans. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 241.

80 W. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 63.

81 R. Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants*, 125.

82 J. D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, 12.

83 S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 40.

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Carey Moore laments the author's undeveloped syntactical prowess and remarks that 'the Hebrew vocabulary is scarcely what might be called "rich."'[84] It is a verdict Moore justifies by pointing to the preponderance of certain words the main one being royal terminology with the root מלך occurring 167 times in approximately 250 verses.[85] Sandra Berg notes that the royal titles are not applied strictly to the king as they 'regularly occur without an accompanying proper name, the context clarifying the referent.'[86] The appearance of the same root averaging more than one for every two verses is a terminological oversubscription that cannot be explained adequately in terms of a 'poverty of vocabulary,'[87] especially when considering Berg's observation that in those numerous appearances the royal titles 'sometimes are used ironically.'[88] The frequent occurrence of the root מלך points to what must have been one of the major concerns of the author of Esther. Otherwise פור must have featured with some prominence. It is my submission that purely on the basis of numerical strength the interpretive framework for Esther must be built around that evident concern with things monarchical. The condition of diaspora, however spiritualised it gets, remains a reflection of political failure. It is my considered opinion that the author of Esther must have been concerned more with making sense of a political condition of diaspora than the liturgical festival of Purim.

5.3 *A Thematic Return to Ancient Israel's Monarchical Genesis*

Esther is known for providing names of its characters, even those whose part in the story could pass as negligible. Without diminishing the important role of any of the given characters, it is clear that the story develops around two main players namely Haman and Mordecai. In introducing each of the two, we are given their respective genealogies. Mordecai was 'son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite' (Esther 2:5) and Haman was 'son of Hammedatha the Agagite (Esther 3:1). For genealogies such as the one of Abram, (Genesis 11:10–26) and David (Ruth 4:18–22), these are comparatively too brief. Yet when read together they show an interesting congruence. An argument that can be pieced together from the biblical narratives is that David's ascension to the throne of ancient Israel was fraudulent and the claim to hold on to power by his progeny was unsustainable with the bigger portion of ancient

84 C. A Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther*, liv–lv.
85 C. A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther*, liv.
86 S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 59.
87 C. A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther*, lv.
88 S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther*, note 2 on page 83.

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Israel breaking away. As argued above, what was flawed with human monarchy was not something that crept in at a later point but, rather, in the very beginning with the demand for a king (1 Samuel 8:1–9). Emerging as the first monarch from such an unfortunate demand was one Saul whose genealogy is given as, 'There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel son of Zeror son of Becorath son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth. He had a son whose name was Saul …' (1 Samuel 9:1–2). To say his reign was turbulent is understating the fact. His fall was associated with his failure to obey the instructions of the Lord by, among other things, sparing the life of Agag the king of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15). Saul's fate is decided by his failure to obey the real King, יהוה. Obedience on the part of the human king is paramount, as Gordon notes of 1 Samuel 15 'the key word "obey" … occurs five times in verses 19–24 and the whole of the narrative is built around this theme.'[89] This ensured that יהוה remained the actual king.

It has already been discussed in Chapter 1 above that while Esther draws on historical traditions it cannot be read as a historical account. Mention has been made of Darius' establishment of an oligarchy around the Seven Great Houses[90] and Persian ethnicity becoming 'an important prerequisite for all top administrative posts throughout the empire's history'.[91] It can be inferred on that basis that the characters of Esther, Mordecai and Haman are more than likely fictitious. The respective links between Mordecai and Saul on the one hand, Haman and Agag on the other cannot be mere coincidences. The author of Esther takes his readers back to where it all went wrong in order to make everything right again by use of a number of parallels. As the story now stands, Mordecai is the hero in that by seeing Haman, the descendent of Agag, to his death (Esther 8, 9), Mordecai corrects the errors of his ancestor Saul. The instruction to Saul is 'Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.' (1 Samuel 15:3). In other words, 'do not take plunder'. Yet in defiance of king יהוה's instruction, 'Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not destroy them …' (1 Samuel 15:9). In contrast, with express permission by a royal decree 'to plunder their goods' (Esther 8:9–11), in their decisively one sided victory over their foes, the Jews 'did not touch the plunder' (Esther 9:10). That contrast is readily made available to

89 R. P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 36–37.

90 L. Allen, *The Persian Empire: A History*, 42.

91 J. L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 52.

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the reader, ignoring the human monarchy's indulgencies and heeding יהוה's instructions. These parallels show that the author of Esther is concerned with correcting what went wrong with the establishment of human monarchy in general and the monarchy in ancient Israel particularly.

6 Genealogical Material: Diaspora as the Story's Kernel

This project proceeds from a suspicion that reading the story of Esther on the basis of its connection to the Purim Festival is inadequate. That the textual basis linking the story with the festival is in chapter nine, a portion of the book of which connection with the original plot has been disputed[92] compounds the problem. To read the story of Esther, alternative concerns for the author and the community behind the story must be sought. In the foregoing section I have shown how political concerns are arguably central to the author of Esther and his audience. The apparent concern with royalty and royal court politics belie any claim to the centrality of Purim or things liturgical at the point in time when the story is first told. It is on that basis that this thesis develops the hypothesis that the memory of the institution of the monarch in ancient Israel by the diaspora communities provides a viable alternative to reading the story of Esther. Key to this connection is the genealogical material linking the two protagonists of this story with the genesis of the monarchy in ancient Israel (Esther 2:5–6; 3:1). Interpreting biblical genealogies is a field of enquiry with its fair share of problems. In this section the aim is only to provide a model by which the genealogical material in Esther can be used.

6.1 *Biblical Genealogies in General*

There was a time in the history of humanity when individual identities made sense only within a family and tribal context. The destiny of an individual was decided rarely by personal achievements but, rather, by the figures that littered their genealogy. Robert R. Wilson noted:

> In most tribal societies, and in fact in most nonurban societies, kinship relationships play a more important role in a person's life than they normally do in urban, industrialized societies. A person receives his status,

92 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 39–63.

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> his rights and obligations, by virtue of the kinship ties that link him to the other people with whom he comes in contact.[93]

This is so because before trade and professional relationships were fully developed, kinship ties provided the context in which identities could find meaning. Individuals' behaviour, character, and achievements could be estimated and explained in terms of who they were in relation to their kinship rather than their personal feats. This is typical for the world of the Old Testament generally, as Paul Joyce notes: 'The reader of the Old Testament cannot help being struck by the importance attached in ancient Israel to the social group or community.'[94] It was one's kinship background that would determine who they would become – from prince to king, princess to queen and so on.

Albrecht Alt made a distinction between the pathways by which kingship developed in the two post-Solomon kingdoms of Israel. It is his argument that while the kingdom of Judah in the south developed around the concept of dynasty in a tradition centred on David, the Northern kingdom, with notable differences of course, went back to the origins when kingship was tied to charisma.[95] In the one tradition preserved regarding Saul's ascension to the throne of Israel the wording of Samuel's prophetic announcement does not end with just the individual: 'And on whom is all Israel's desire fixed, if not on you and on all your ancestral house?' (1 Sam. 9:20b). As would be expected in the narrative, Saul is perplexed to say the least and what he questions are not his personal qualifications but rather those of his family and tribe: 'I am only a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel, and my family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin. Why have you spoken to me in this way?' (1 Sam. 9:21). Yet Saul did not descend from ordinary stock for he had as his father Kish, a man described earlier as of great wealth (1 Sam. 9:1), thus by inference, a great and blessed man. It was widely held that how far an individual could go was determined by their stock. Identifying individuals' genuine Israelite ancestry must have become acute and poignant in post-exilic context. The Ezra-Nehemiah narratives demonstrate that Jewish identity became very important and the way to tell a true Jew from one who was not was by establishing provable Israelite ancestry. It is for this reason that Robert R. Wilson avers:

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93 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 18.

94 P. Joyce, 'The Individual and the Community' in J. Rogerson, ed., *Beginning Old Testament Study* (London: SPCK, 1998), 77.

95 A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, 239–259.

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> Scholarly interest in the biblical genealogies is not a modern phenomenon but one that has its roots in the biblical period itself. As early as the postexilic age, nationalistic and cultic concerns within Judaism, coupled with growing Messianic speculations, led to an increased interest in general and in biblical genealogies in particular.[96]

Introducing characters of worth would require linking them with one or another of the heroes from the past, so that what they were going to achieve would be anchored in long standing traditions.

For the longest part, biblical scholarship's interaction with genealogical material in the Hebrew Bible has tended to accord them a great deal of historical value. Genealogical material has been used in biblical studies in a clandestine manner for purposes of historical reconstructions. While the variations and discrepancies were noted, the general consensus has been that biblical genealogies contain historical material essentially:

> After the turn of the era, the biblical genealogies were discussed both by Jewish and by Christian scholars, but in spite of the heat that some of these discussions generated, early scholars were more or less in agreement about the nature of the genealogies and about their historical accuracy. Although these early scholars never dismissed the possibility that some of the postbiblical genealogical material might not be reliable, they saw the genealogies in the Hebrew Bible as accurate sources which could safely be used to reconstruct the history of Israel during the biblical period and which, in fact, could even shed light on the history of civilization as a whole.[97]

Taking the ages given literally, the genealogical material in Genesis 5 and 11 and all that could be pieced together from the subsequent patriarchal narratives, biblical scholars have made attempts to fix and date such key points as the creation, patriarchal movements, the Egyptian excursion, the Exodus, the conquest and the institution of the monarchy. By use of the same material it has been deemed possible to tell how people were related and map out the routes they took to settle where they were now found. While conclusions reached would be often vehemently disputed, the fact that biblical genealogies could be used in this manner was generally accepted.

96 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, 1.

97 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, 1.

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The foregoing monolithic understanding of the historical accuracy of the biblical genealogies remained intact and pretty much unchallenged until the post-Enlightenment era. The rise in scientific thinking led to questioning of the figures given. Robert R. Wilson has noted: 'At that time scholars began to doubt that the genealogies were actually pieces of historical writing, and these doubts raised in an acute way the problem of genealogy and history.'[98] The sustained attack on the traditional and unquestioned view of the historical accuracy of biblical genealogies came about because of several developments linked to post enlightenment generally and, particularly to the developments within the field of biblical studies itself. First, inroads made in the field of linguistics meant increased access to material from the ancient Near East hitherto unknown to biblical scholars. Such material as the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish* and the Mesopotamian deluge version, *The Gilgamesh Epic* took biblical studies by storm because of their proximity in detail to the Hebrew Bible versions of the same. Directly linked to this development, Wilson notes:

> ... the latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed an enormous Increase in the quantity of Near Eastern archaeological and textual material available to biblical scholars. Some of the Near Eastern documents that came to light during this period revealed parallels to the early parts of Genesis and thus raised the possibility that the biblical text was at this point dependent on common Near Eastern mythological traditions. If this were the case, scholars reasoned, then the genealogies contained in Genesis might have been constructed by joining names that had been extracted from early myths and legends.[99]

If the biblical narratives containing the genealogies held in such high regard were mere adaptations of Babylonian, Mesopotamian and other ancient Near Eastern myths then their historical accuracy could not be sustained anymore. It is in the wake of this understanding Theodore H. Robinson developed the view that the genealogies in Genesis reflect 'a stage in Hebrew religion when the objects of worship were the eponymous ancestors of the tribes which bore their names.'[100] In relation to Esther studies, Stephanie Dalley[101] (to whom I will return in Chapter 4 below) and Adam Silverstein have worked from the

98 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, 2.

99 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, 2.

100 W. O. E. Oesterley and T. H. Robinson, A History of Israel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1.53.

101 S. Dalley, *Esther's Revenge at Susa: From Sennacherib to Ahasuerus* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

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perspective that reading Esther could benefit from looking at a Mesopotamian/Assyrian background. In fact, Silverstein has made a case for reading the story of Esther on the basis of its striking similarities with the *Enuma Elish*:

> The fact that the Old Testament (OT) Book of Esther is to some degree indebted to Ancient Near Eastern precedents is old news in scholarly circles … Indeed, the last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable scramble amongst scholars to identify the precise Babylonian myth upon which the Book of Esther was based. The arguments hinged on the association of Esther and Mordecai with the Babylonian gods Ishtar and Marduk respectively.[102]

During the same period, the field of biblical studies witnessed a new paradigm in terms of approaches to biblical literature. What later became known as the historical critical methods took roots in this era, becoming the definitive approach to biblical texts for the better part of the next two centuries. In literary criticism, particularly in the work of Julius Wellhausen wherein the Documentary Hypothesis was crystallised, the historicity of genealogical material inevitably came under scrutiny. The hypothesis argued for the existence of at least four literary sources behind the Pentateuch. Wilson notes that 'Literary critics saw most genealogical material as belonging to the P source, dating no earlier than the exile. The earliest genealogical material could not be earlier than the Davidic period.'[103] An exilic dating of the Priestly genealogical material finds resonance in the estimation of Frank Moore Cross.[104] This would render the historicity of the genealogical material suspicious for it would mean it is too far removed from the events it purports to record. If anything they would illuminate more on historical conditions prevailing at the time they were put together than those they claim to represent. That most of the names on these lists were names of known tribal groupings supports the view. Julius Wellhausen commenting on what he argued were the earlier genealogies found in the Yahwist source noted, 'genealogical form lends itself to any sort of material, but in patriarchal legends the ethnographic element is always dominant. Abraham alone is certainly not the name of a people like Isaac and Lot …; he might with more likelihood be regarded as a free creation

102 A. Silverstein, 'The Book of Esther and the *Enūma Elish*' in *Bulletin of SOAS*, 69 (2) (2006), 209–223.

103 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, 3.

104 F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 206.

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of unconscious art.'[105] Marshall D. Johnson reads genealogies in the J source as speaking of tribal relations:

> … simply a classification of Semitic tribes around Palestine as descendants or kinsmen of Abraham the Semite *par excellence*. In addition to considering Moab and the Ammonites as sons of Lot [note Gen. 19:36–8], we find a list of Nahor as a group of the twelve Aramaic tribes in the territory northeast and east of Palestine (Gen. 22:20–4). Similarly, descendants of Abraham by his second wife, Keturah, are actually the eponyms of a group of northwest Arabian tribes (Gen. 25:1–6).[106]

This goes to show that the authors of the biblical texts that included genealogical material were not concerned with conveying statements of historical truth but, rather, to show the relationships that characterised the communities that shared the known world. Therefore, it would be misleading, at the very least, to construct an historical portrait using such data.

The fact that the bulk of genealogical material is generally associated with the P source and therefore very late compared to the events portrayed in the content of such material renders it all the more suspicious. Biblical scholars of a maximalist persuasion have argued that late writers like P, the Chronicler, authors of Ezra and Nehemiah had before them extant records of genealogical detail such that a late dating should not diminish the historical value of their records. To pursue the line of thinking that later writers had access to documents in which these genealogies were preserved would be a matter of stretching the evidence too far. Wellhausen notes of the genealogies in Chronicles:

> The language affords no room for the conjecture that we here possess extracts from documents of high antiquity … One might as well try to hear the grass growing as attempt to derive from such a source historical knowledge of the conditions of Ancient Israel.'[107]

This is a position reached by looking at, where older genealogy lists can be found, the tweaks effected by late writers, which betray an agenda that had very little to do with the preservation and transmission of historical data. In

105 J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* J. Sutherland Black and A. Menzies, trans., (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1885), 320.

106 M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies: With Special Reference to the setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 4–5.

107 J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 213, 215.

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respect of the work of the Chronicler particularly, Johnson concludes that 'genealogical introduction is presented as a picture of the theocracy *par excellence*, that of David and a few of his more worthy followers.'[108] The material that the reader encounters in biblical genealogies is only telling the story as perceived by the author. Wilson discerns the same results as emerging in form critical studies:

> The form critics also suggested that later literary sources sometimes used artificial frameworks to tie together bits of early oral tradition. Thus the genealogies might be considered late. Artificially constructed links between early oral units.'[109]

In offering a summary of his study of the Old Testament genealogies, Johnson gives eight purposes for which such material could have been preserved and none of them has anything to do with history but, rather, for apologetic purposes, both nationalistic and theological.[110]

It has become apparent that genealogies were so important such that in those instances where an individual would achieve a lot without any figures of worth identifiable in their past then some reconstruction of their genealogy would be necessary. For example, after painting an impressive picture of a man named Boaz (Ruth 2–4), towards the end of the book the reader learns that this great mean sired a child with Ruth (Ruth 4:13–17). The women present, presumably assisting in childbirth, speak of the joy restored to Naomi and how יהוה had restored her life, the bond of love between Naomi and Ruth and how the daughter-in-law had proven to be so valuable. All this is clearly leading to the naming of the new-born child, yet in a manner at best curious the reader learns: 'The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; …' (Ruth 4:17). There is a clear textual disparity here as the joy expressed in the speech given and עבד (root of which means 'servant') do not agree. The textual discord is explained in the last part where it reads: '… he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.' (Ruth 4:17c). The last five verses of the chapter go on to present the genealogy of David calling from memory such illustrious figures as Salmon, one of the

108 M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 75.
109 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, 3.
110 M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 77–82.

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heroic spies sent by Joshua at the eve of taking possession of the promised land (Joshua 2:1).[111] In relation to this observation, Wilson notes:

> Biblical scholars must now take seriously the possibility that the ancient Israelites were interested not in simply passing on a received tradition but in shaping the tradition for particular tendentious reasons. The historical actuality may not be that traditions change of their own accord but that they are deliberately altered.[112]

Without ruling out other possibilities in reading Ruth 4:13–22 as discussed here, the name of the son born to Boaz and Ruth is replaced here by that of the known grandfather of David in order to provide an impressive genealogy for a figure remembered as such a great king. It can now be argued that genealogies could be constructed or altered in order to introduce someone of some narrative significance.

John Barton locates interest in otherwise uninteresting biblical genealogical material as belonging to the redaction critical approach:

> Source critics like nothing better than a narrative that is repetitious, inconsistent and rambling; form critics thrive on incoherent collections of unrelated sayings, like some of the chapters of Isaiah, and delight in stereotyped formulas and conventional stories. With redaction criticism we find that even the genealogies, stock-in-trade of bad jokes about the unedifying quality of the Old Testament, have become interesting and theologically significant.[113]

This follows the fact that source and form critical approaches establish the disjointedness of the biblical material of which the natural sequel would be to find out the interests central in bringing together otherwise unrelated traditions. If traditions about the patriarchs were initially independent, bringing them into the kind of relationships they are in the versions in which they are now must have been deliberate on the part of the final redactor. To say Isaac was the father of the twin brothers Esau and Jacob, that Esau was the elder brother and Jacob received the fathers blessing; this constitutes a deliberate

111 A genealogical tradition survived beyond New Testament times that Salmon returned and married the heroic prostitute Rahab making her a maternal ancestor of David and Jesus (Matthew 1:5).

112 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, 205.

113 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 47.

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scheme. Otherwise roles could easily have been changed. It is for this reason that Barton avers: 'The interest lies not in the genealogy itself, but in what the redactor has done with it.'[114]

6.2 *Genealogical Material in Esther*

As already alluded to in the introduction above, with Purim occupying the centre of Esther studies, little attention has been paid to the genealogy of Mordecai. In turning to the concept of diaspora as central to interpreting the story, I am picking on a detail admitted in the story, merely acknowledged in Esther studies and yet to be employed as the central heuristic key. The connection between the story of Esther and the rest of the 'biblical story' is established in the genealogical detail provided: 'Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away' (Esther 2:5–6). The mere conception of a Jew in Susa as Mordecai's introduction here points out warrants attention, a location clearly far away from Eretz Israel. The explanation for that anomaly follows a few lines down when we are told it is because of the occurrence of the deportation at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Where this material has been employed, it has been mainly for the purpose of demonstrating the historical value of the entire narrative. With little regard to the detail provided, attention has been given to the fact that if Mordecai is the one being referred to by the expression אשר הגלה (who was exiled) and if by Ahasuerus the author of Esther is referring to Xerxes (486–465 BCE), then he would have been at least a centenarian, making it impossible for him and his cousin to play the roles assigned to them in the plot. To get round the problem, traditional exegetes have tended to interpret the phrase as referring to Kish. Such reading has been so fashionable as to influence the NRSV translation to replace אשר in the cited phrase with the proper name Kish. However, as Berlin notes: '… this interpretation, while syntactically possible, is less probable; and it also diminishes the connection between the Kish mentioned here and Kish, the father of Saul (who was certainly not part of the early sixth century Babylonian exile).'[115] The problem has been caused by the need to make sense of the genealogical material in the context of what is accepted as true historically. Utilising the forgoing discussions, I will now focus on the genealogy of Mordecai, locating the material within a context characterised by affinity to a memory of diaspora.

114 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 49.

115 A. Berlin, *Esther*, 25.

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Mention has been made of the several purposes of biblical genealogies.[116] As one of these purposes Johnson states: 'Genealogies were also used to demonstrate the legitimacy of an individual in his office or provide an individual of rank with connections to a worthy family or individual of the past.'[117] He goes on to link this purpose with the postexilic temple cult, especially where it concerned the priesthood. For this project, what is particularly noteworthy is the fact that genealogies could be and often were produced without the need for proof. Caution must be exercised in reading genealogical material against a historical background as Wilson warns: 'First, one must ask whether biblical and ancient Near Eastern writers considered genealogy a historiographical genre … the same way that we do today.'[118] I will now turn to pick on a few things still outstanding so far as a way of showing that historical accuracy was not part of the agenda of the author of Esther in presenting Mordecai's genealogy (Esther 2:5–6).

The genealogy of Mordecai begins with identifying him not by his name but rather as a Jew: איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה (literally 'There was a man a Jew in the citadel [of] Susa'). In Chapter 1 above, I made reference to Anne-Mareike Wetter's long drawn discussion on the meaning and identity of the term (ם)יהודי in MT Esther and her argument that how one defines and translates this term is key to understanding the whole book and the branch of diaspora Judaism it represents.[119] Wetter argues against the tendency in Esther studies to limit the meaning of יהודי to nothing more than a mere ethnic label exclusive of religious undertones:

> I resist this interpretation for several reasons. First of all, it seems to be based on an 'argument from silence': just because there is no mention of God or any specifically religious customs in the book, the conclusion is drawn that *y*^{e}*hûdî*(*m*) must be an ethnic label. Second, it presupposes a neat distinction between ethnic identity on the one hand, and religious identity on the other.[120]

It is my view that not just in the occurrence of the term יהודי here, but also in the manner in which it is employed, the author of Esther was not aiming at simply conveying an ethnic and/or a religious label. Stephanie Dalley, whose

116 M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 77–82.
117 M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 78.
118 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, 7.
119 A. Wetter, 'How Jewish is Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish?', 597.
120 A. Wetter, 'How Jewish is Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish?', 597.

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theory I will attend to in greater detail in Chapter 4 below, has drawn the attention of Esther studies to the possibility that the story could be an adaptation of seventh century Assyrian mythology.[121] Within the canonical Hebrew Bible, except in Esther, the name מרדכי appears only twice in what look like duplicate lists of returnees in the Ezra-Nehemiah corpus (Ezra 2:2 and Neh. 7:7). It seems to be a name deriving from some root that has no clear etymological affinity in the Hebrew language. This observation on its own may not account for much but when taken together with the name's phonetic proximity to Marduk, the god of Babylon, it seems reasonable to infer that Mordecai was not a Jew after all.[122] In its final form, it reads like the author of Esther is forcibly attaching a whole Jewish identity, not just some ethnic and/or religious label, to a character that otherwise is not Jewish.

Introducing Mordecai as a Jew, provide genealogical details that start with Kish and end by adding the detail that he was: איש ימיני must have only been deliberate on the part of the author. The appropriation of a Jewish identity to a non-Jewish character is done so skilfully such that when, at the end of the verse, the reader encounters the phrase איש ימיני computing it in Jewish terms is only natural. In a manner I suspect is not only insinuated but also intended by the author of Esther, most authorities read איש ימיני as 'a Benjaminite'. This is not random as the first character of the genealogy is given as Kish – a name readily associated with the father of Saul who is known to have been of the tribe of Benjamin (1 Sam. 9:1). Of the several times English authorities have rendered a Hebrew expression 'a Benjaminite' with specific reference to figures identified as belonging to the tribe of Benjamin, it has always been almost a transliteration of some variation of ימיני בן (Jud. 3:15; 19:21; 1 Sam. 9:1, 21; 2 Sam. 16:11; 19:17; 22:7; 1 Kings 2:8; 1 Chron. 27:12 and Ps. 7:1). Judges 3:15 presents an instance where the word ימיני occurs twice in the same sentence, first being used to designate the tribal identity 'Benjaminite' of Ehud's father Gera and, second (without בן), in relation to Ehud's left handedness (by the fact of his right-hand being bound). Thus, it must be noted that the association of ימיני and the Jewish tribe of Benjamin is only one of several ways in which the word is understood. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* has the association of the word ימיני and Benjaminite (almost always prefixed with בן not איש) as one among several possibilities including 'right' and 'south'.[123] Reading ימיני in Esther 2:5 as

121 S. Dalley, *Esther's Revenge at Susa: From Sennacherib to Ahasuerus* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 185–226.

122 There is of course the option to see non-Yahwistic names as necessitated by the need for trade within wider regions. I will give full attention to this theory in Chapter 5 below.

123 D. J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* Vol. IV (Sheffield, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 227–229.

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a Benjaminite must be acknowledged as a rare occurrence of such connection to take place with clarity the more common expression would be בן־ימיני (literally 'son of Jamin'). It seems the genealogy of Mordecai is constructed to give sufficient information to guide the reader in a certain and definite way. The reader is given sufficient clues to make the intended connections on their own. Making reference to the Deuteronomistic prediction that יהוה will be at war with the Amalekites for all generations (Ex. 16:17), Wetter concludes:

> Haman the Agagite is not simply an extraordinarily malicious individual, nor is he the representative of an existing ethnic group. He is Amalek and Agag resurrected, and it is the duty of any "Israelite" in general and a Benjaminite in particular to stand up to him – and certainly not to bow down to him.[124]

The author of Esther utilises accepted tradition to let his readers fill in the gaps, there is nothing to say Mordecai was actually a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin. Yet there is also nothing to say categorically that he was not.

One more anomaly deserving attention in respect of the genealogy of Mordecai is the fact of an unattested ancestry line. The insinuation by the author of the story of Esther in locating Mordecai (and Esther) in a timeline that has Kish on the one end and Jeconiah on the other is significant for this thesis. As already acknowledged, there is no direct link between the Kish given in Esther 2:5 and the one who is given as the father of Saul, the first occupant of the monarchical throne of ancient Israel (1 Samuel 9:1–2). The genealogical details provided are evidently flawed in that the Shimei linked to monarchical traditions is given as the son of Gera, not Kish. This Shimei is the one who cursed David in a tradition that has often been cited to highlight the tension between the reign of Saul and the house of Benjamin on the one hand and on the other, that of David and the house of Judah (1 Samuel 16:5–8). The flaws notwithstanding, the allusion is unmistakeable. In the *First Targum to Esther*, there is a pointer to how the Rabbinic tradition interpreted such detail: '… that same Shimi who insulted David and whom Joab wanted to kill but he (David) did not let him (do it) because he foresaw that the redeemers Mordekhai [sic] and Esther were destined to descend from him. So when Shimi ceased to procreate, David ordered his son Solomon to kill him.'[125] For the early readers of Esther, the link between Esther and Mordecai on the one hand and ancient Israel's royalty on the other was not in doubt. Josephus' introductory notation

124 A. Wetter, 'How Jewish is Esther', 602.

125 B. Grossfeld, trans., *The First Targum to Esther*, 45.

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to his version of the story of Esther confirms that the early reception of the story assumed the link readily. Referring to Artaxerxes, Josephus wrote:

> When this man had obtained the government over the Persians, the whole nation of the Jews, with their wives and children, were in danger of perishing; the occasion whereof we shall declare in a little time; for it is proper, in the first place, to explain something relating to this king, and how he came to marry a Jewish wife, who was herself of the royal family also, and who is related to have saved our nation …[126]

Josephus' reference to Esther as being of royal blood is because of the mention of Kish in her ancestry. The inclusion of the names of Kish and Shimei in the genealogy of Mordecai and Esther is meant to and succeeds in alluding to a link between the story of Esther and ancient Israel's institution of government for centuries. For an author clearly writing to be believed it would seem curious why the 'fictitious' genealogy of his main characters would be marred in such controversial detail unless it was deliberate. It is my contention that the tendency to go back down memory lane to a point in time of national sovereignty is typical of diaspora mentality. The ideal for the community behind the story of Esther is not in the present state of landlessness nor is there any hope that such an ideal would ever be realised.

7 Summary and Implications

Taking cue from Parker and other textual critics, it must be acknowledged that establishing an exact date of writing for MT Esther (my version of choice) is very problematic. However, the fact that Josephus had a full text before him by the first century CE and the discovery of Aramaic fragments of what could be Proto-Esther at Qumran (4Q550) dated first century BCE suggests that some version of Esther as we have it was in circulation much earlier than the suggested date in the last quarter of the second century.[127] Historical critical analysis has shown that despite its comic nature, MT Esther must be read as a serious text protesting against hegemony of the Persian Empire. In contrast to conventional ways of reading Esther as aetiology for Purim and thus a religious text, I have argued that at its centre are serious political concerns. This I have done by

126 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.6.1.

127 This is a question I will return to in concluding this project when all considerations have been made.

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noting the negligibly sparse reference to Purim when compared to the preponderance of political terms and imagery. I have also made the observation that the political protest defining the plot of Esther is given in a diasporic setting and, in this regard, the genealogy of Mordecai (Esther 2:5–6) becomes central to reading the whole book.

Having noted the ambiguous manner in which the said genealogical material so central to the plot is presented, I have considered how biblical scholarship has made sense of biblical genealogies in general. Notable in the evidently constructed genealogy of Mordecai, is the author's effort to locate the story within the framework of a memory encompassing the themes of deportation, exile and diaspora. Dalley has noted a certain uneasiness felt by some Jews to this day about celebrating Purim.[128] Adele Berlin has referred to Esther as 'a story about, and presumably for, Jews in the Diaspora during the Persian period …'[129] It is very unlikely that a story such as that of Esther would have generated interest within the geographical confines of the Persian province of Yehud. On the contrary, it is a story that would find resonance and make sense in the context of a displaced section of the Jews, a section away from Eretz Israel. This study proposes an understanding of both the festival and the authenticating story of Esther as emerging out of a diaspora context. Susan Niditch alludes to the same when she says: 'I am inclined to believe that the work was written in diaspora, for a cultural group surrounded by overlords in an alien setting, for a minority rather than for a conquered and culturally threatened majority in Palestine.'[130] The story of Esther is indeed a diaspora story, even though this element in the story of Esther has been acknowledged, it has not featured with prominence in the interpretation of the story – a gap this study aims to fill in. Diaspora is not just the context within which the plot develops; rather it is the very heuristic key in the light of which the story should be read.

128 S. Dalley, *Esther's Revenge at Susa*, 187.

129 A. Berlin, *Esther*, xv.

130 S. Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority' in A. Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 45.

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CHAPTER 3

Subverting Assumptions about a Babylonian-Persian Dichotomy: a Critical Assessment of the Historical Milieu of Esther

1 Introduction

The story of Esther unfolds within a Persian context (Esther 1:1) and 'many scholars have remarked on the accuracy of the Persian background in Esther.'[1] In this chapter I aim to assess the basis upon which that historical accuracy has been assumed and to establish the extent to which modern day diaspora terms can be applied justifiably in understanding Jewish communities in the world of ancient Persia and later periods. Until the establishment of the Groningen Achaemenid History Workshop in the 1980s,[2] there was scant material available for a reconstruction of Persian history from the Persians themselves. It is for this reason that scholarship with interest in Persian history has welcomed this development with enthusiasm as expressed in Lindsay Allen's statement:

> The specialized study of the culture and politics of the empire through evidence unearthed from within its bounds, whether a contemporary text or an archaeological artefact, has developed much more recently. An international academic community spanning the number of disciplines concerned with this subject continues to raise new questions, opinions and evidence. There is great potential in this exciting field for discovering new insights into the ancient world, as evidence emerges from the multiple languages and cultures that made up the empire.[3]

Prior to this concerted effort in understanding Persian history, there was very little known about the Persians from Persian sources. That effort and what little gains it has made notwithstanding, the challenge persists – still a lot more must be unearthed before the world of Persia can be accessed in a manner that

1 A. Berlin, *Esther*, The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xxviii.

2 The proceedings of the conference have been published in several volumes and many authorities cited in this chapter were either participants or have had access to the material in these volumes.

3 L. Allen, *The Persian Empire: A History* (London: British Museum Company Ltd, 2005), 6.

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could pass as satisfactory for purposes of historical constructions. Wouter F. M. Henkelman notes that the situation has been made worse by the fact that the larger portion of the few inscriptions available that could pass as Persian are in fact Elamite, becoming the basis for convoluted theories that Persian kings were illiterate and relied on their Elamite subjects for any scribal undertakings.[4] The much-celebrated historical accuracy in Esther as expressed in the statement above has been established by looking to Greek writings, which are so abundantly available to fill in the gap. The rise of Cyrus is portrayed in a very positive light as marking clear discontinuity with the preceding Babylonian regime; reversing the policies of the preceding administration most conspicuously by returning deportees and assisting them restore their cultic centres. It is from this backdrop that Amélie Kuhrt sums up the memory of the figure of Cyrus as: 'Cyrus the Great of Persia who founded one of the most extensive and powerful empires of the ancient world has traditionally enjoyed a very good press.'[5] The 'good press' has resulted in a sustained monolithic portrayal of the person of Cyrus and the Persian Empire he is credited to have founded as defining a moment of disjuncture; a point in time when all things associated with Babylonia were brought to a complete halt. In the new dispensation as ushered in by Cyrus the Great, a more benevolent and tolerant Persian regime took over from the cruel and bad Babylonians.

Admittedly, these Greek writings are of historical value insofar as they provide a window into understanding some views of the Persians and their institutions. However, I wish to assess the implications for reading Esther if what we find in these writings are 'Greek'[6] attitudes to (and not unbiased historical data on) the Persian Empire and its institutions. It is interesting to note that details relating to the restoration of cities and cultic centres in these sources omit reference to Jerusalem. The standard treatment of this omission has been to read biblical narratives related to this matter as here authenticated anyway as John Curtis notes: 'Although the Jews are not mentioned in the Cylinder, it is thought to be at this time that they returned to Jerusalem to build the second

4 W. F. M. Henkelman, 'Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Elamite: A Case of Mistaken Identity' in R. Rollinger, B. Truschnegg, R. Bichler eds., *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich/Herodotus and the Persian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), 286.

5 A. Kuhrt, 'The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy' in *JSOT* 25 (1983) 83–97, 83.

6 I have marked out 'Greek' because I am employing it in this instance in its broad sense, as I am aware that pre-Alexandrian Greece was organised around city-states and as such a common attitude to anything may not have been possible. It may be argued that what I am referring to here as 'Greek' attitude may have been only true to one city-state or another.

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temple, as recorded in 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah.'[7] It would seem therefore that the significance of Jewishness has been disproportionately exaggerated in the book of Esther. With evidence pointing to a focus on Babylon and its vicinity, that the Persian political authority would concern itself with matters affecting Jerusalem and the Jews in the way depicted in the story of Esther is very unlikely. It is also critical in this study to ask the following question: given that the Jews remaining in the Persian province of Yehud and their compatriots who were now forcibly scattered across the empire shared one and the same political overlord, how appropriate is it to speak of the community behind Esther in diaspora terms?

2 Taking into Account Alternative Sources of Persian History

The major problem in attempting to re-construct the world of ancient Persia historically is one of sources. Geo Widengren, in an article focusing on Jewish life during the Persian empire, places available literary sources on Persian history into four major categories namely: (i) biblical Jewish sources such as Ezra-Nehemiah traditions comprising a portion of the Chronicler's History, (ii) non-biblical Jewish sources such as Josephus and the papyri from Elephantine and Samaria, (iii) non-Jewish sources such as the Cuneiform historical texts from as far back as the time of Nabonidus, and the Cyrus Cylinder and (iv) archaeological remains from several sites in Palestine that have yielded some vital data from the Persian period.[8] It is from this sort of background that Pierre Briant notes:

> One of the most remarkable peculiarities of Achaemenid history is that, unlike most conquering peoples, the Persians left no written testaments of their own history, in the *narrative* sense of the word. It is noteworthy that unlike the Assyrian Kings, the Great Kings had no Annals prepared where the memory of their mighty deeds on the battlefield or in the hunt could be made heroic and preserved. We have no chronicle prepared by a court scholar at the command of the Great Kings.[9]

7 J. Curtis, *The Cyrus Cylinder and Ancient Persia: A New Beginning for the Middle East* (London: The British Museum, 2013), 16.

8 G. Widengren, 'The Persian Period' in Hayes, J. H. and Miller, J., eds., *Israelite and Judean History* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 490–500.

9 P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (trans. by P. T. Daniels) (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 5–6.

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Among many other factors, the unprecedented nature of the Persian empire becomes yet another cause for concern as Amélie Kuhrt notes: 'The material for studying the Achaemenid empire presents particular difficulties, not so much because it is sparse but because it is very disparate.'[10] There is no entity comparable to it in so many ways; size, administrative structures, postal (and other service) infrastructural networks. As remarked above, in the absence of literary sources written by the Persians themselves, the much-celebrated historical accuracy in Esther has been established by looking to Greek writings so abundantly available to fill in the gap. Briant expresses the consequent complication when he notes: 'Here is an extraordinary situation: one must reconstruct the narrative thread of Achaemenid history from the writings of their subjects and their enemies …'[11] It is curious that Widengren does not mention the work of Greek historians and writers such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Ctesias, Xenophon, to name a few whose works are given a more detailed treatment by Lester L. Grabbe.[12] Their methodological limitations granted, their influence on what has come to be known of ancient Persia cannot be overemphasized: 'Until the rediscovery of primary sources from the ancient Near East in the nineteenth century, the Greek accounts were the major basis for reconstructing Persian history.'[13] As already stated, there is not much left by the Persians themselves to allow for a balance of views with those emerging from the sources produced by people who, for the most part, despised them.

The consequent Greek influence on Persian studies becomes even more apparent when one takes into consideration the nature of terminology dominating the discourse. Lindsey Allen notes in respect of the terminology used starting with the term Achaemenid itself:

> The word is in fact a simplified Greek version of the Old Persian word *Haxamanishiya*. Similarly we tend to refer to Darius rather than *Dariyavaush*, Xerxes rather than *Xshayarsha* and Artaxerxes instead of *Artaxshaca*.[14]

The bulk of what has been passed down as knowledge on Persia has been expressed and preserved in a very bold Greek tint. Even the term "Persia" itself is

10 A. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* Vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2007), 6.

11 P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 7.

12 L. L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Vol. 1. Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 118–130.

13 L. L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Vol. 1*, 119.

14 L. Allen, *The Persian Empire: A History*, 7.

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a Greek corruption of the original "*Parsa*".[15] Regarding these Greek writings, Adele Berlin notes:

> In fact, their works are so voluminous that for lack of anything of comparable mass, and because they were taken as objective fact, they have long been regarded as the standard against which the accuracy of Esther is to be measured. And so, when Esther agrees with Herodotus or Xenophon, Esther was deemed to have accurate information about Persian life.[16]

Studies on Esther have taken shape in this wake; that the story narrative and plot detail fit very well in the general literary paradigm established in the Greek writings. While these Greek writings provide some understanding of Persia, it has become increasingly clear that the Greek sources are not reliable as historical sources as they reflect more of Greek attitudes to Persia and her institutions at a particular point in history. In using these ancient sources, scholars have awakened to the fact that what we have are not sources of history, at least not in the light of modern conceptualisation of historiography. The realisation that what we find in these writings are Greek attitudes to and not historical data on the Persian Empire or its institutions is well expressed by Briant where he says: 'I came to realise with more and more conviction that our entire view of the Achaemenid Empire and its populations was corrupt by the distortions perpetrated by the ancient historians of Alexander.'[17] Persian reign is littered with several attempts to subjugate Greek city-states and it is at the hands of Greece's Alexander the Great that Persian domination falls and gives way to the establishment of the Greek Empire.[18] For a relationship riddled with so much conflict it is a reasonable inference that Greek perception of Persia was more on the negative side and a tendency to ridicule the Persians must have been pretty rife. After giving an account of Cyrus' rise to the throne of united Persia, Herodotus devotes a long literary stretch detailing the observable practices of the Persians, most of which show the Persians as a pretty shallow people.[19] It is having made this observation that Berlin further notes:

> … the Greeks portrayed the Persians – and mostly that means the Persian court – as indulgent, decadent, and effeminate. There was much

15 L. Allen, *The Persian Empire: A History* 7.
16 A. Berlin, *Esther*, xxix.
17 P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 2.
18 A. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* Vol. 1, 1.
19 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. J Marincola (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 1:131–140.

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> emphasis on Persian luxury, palace bureaucracy, and an extensive hierarchy including slaves.[20]

The employment of the same motifs in Esther including the long drinking parties and a general decadence of the Persian royal court gives reason to conclude that 'Esther's image of Persia is stereotypical.'[21] This is not to say that the portrayal of ancient Persia was always negative as some of the motifs cited such as an advanced postal service and imperial law known as דת are signs of sophistication. Amélie Kuhrt points out that in the preceding neo-Assyrian empire, Persia inherited an infrastructure that can be described as well developed 'as is clear from the rich surviving documentation'.[22] Even in the work of Greek historians there are several surges of Persian brilliance such as would necessitate expression of admiration as is exemplified by Herodotus when he states: 'I admire also the custom which forbids even the king himself to put a man to death for a single offence, and any Persian under similar circumstances to punish a servant by an irreparable injury.'[23] It must also be noted that even the drinking parties and orgies that would be viewed with repulsion today were not only acceptable in antiquity but could form part of worship. In earlier traditions than Esther, Amos seems to refer to a practice that may actually be read as embedded in similar practices of religious revelry: '… father and son go into the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down besides every altar on garments taken in pledge …' (Amos 2:7–8). Of course this reference may have had application in a very different context within the prophetic discourse but the mentioning of awkward sexual behaviour and religious altars in such close proximity in relation to Israel's transgressions point to a practice at the very least known to the writer and his audience, a practice acceptable at some level. Similarly, viewing as decadent the 180-day drinking parties and the sexual connotations latent in the summoning of Vashti to appear in the nude before the king and his party could be a matter of external value judgment on an otherwise admirable practice. The tendency to portray ancient Persia and its royal court in a range that includes both negative and positive traits in the story of Esther is only indicative of the fact that the story was told in a way that was common for the time in which it came into being.

Herodotus is acclaimed to have been an exception in that unlike most of his contemporaries, 'he shows no evidence of systematic hostility to the

20 A. Berlin, *Esther*, xxix.

21 A. Berlin, *Esther*, xxx.

22 A. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* Vol. 1, 4.

23 Herodotus, 1:137.

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Persians – hence the accusation directed against him by Plutarch of being a 'friend of the barbarians' (*philobarbaros*).'[24] I have already noted above an instance when Herodotus is on record confessing admiration to some Persian practices. Yet even then, his perception of the Persians was not very different from that of his contemporaries as is stated in declaring his intentions for writing *The Histories*:

> Herodotus of Halicarnassus here displays his inquiry, so that human achievements may not become forgotten in time, and great and marvellous deeds – some displayed by Greeks, some by barbarians – may not be without their glory; and especially to show why the two peoples fought with each other.[25]

It is clear from this citation that the epistemology underpinning Greek thought was that the population of the known world was made up by the Greeks and everyone else. Thus even for the friend of the barbarians, Herodotus viewed the world as having a clear line separating the Hellenes from everyone else; the Persians were indeed barbarians[26] still! The fact that a perception of this nature would influence historical constructions is a critical given.

It is worth mentioning at this point that the Greek historians were not eyewitnesses to the Persian details they were writing about but relied on sources; in Herodotus' terms, the sort of sources he deemed reliable: 'from those who seem to tell the simple truth about him [Cyrus] without trying to exaggerate his exploits.' (1.4.10). Regarding the legendary material relating to the birth of Cyrus, Briant notes that Herodotus had available to him at least three other versions.[27] Thus, beginning with the author and extending to anyone intending to use such material for any historical purpose, some discretion became not only important but also unavoidable.

> What facts can the historian extract from these stories? The identity of certain folkloric themes with themes in the legend of Sargon King of

24 P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 7.

25 Herodotus, 1:1.

26 It must be noted here that while the term 'barbarian' has developed over the ages to carry negative aspects such as savage, primitive and generally uncultured, its classical use in the Greek language was simply as applied here, that is, to describe anyone who could not be called a Hellene. Of course, as was typical of most people of the ancient world to see themselves as the crown of humanity, such a distinction marked the Greek as superior to everyone else.

27 P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 15.

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> Akkad, as it may be reconstructed from the tablets, shows that the various versions are constructed on a very ancient Near Eastern framework, filled out both by the inspiration of popular storytellers and the goals of political propaganda … There is scarcely any doubt that the legend incorporates typical Iranian features as well. All these tales are intended primarily to exalt the memory of a charismatic founder, marked from his birth by signs of uncommon destiny.[28]

It is clear therefore that the materials available to Herodotus were heavily imbued with intentions that were not primarily focused on the preservation of historical truths but rather were aimed to convey other sorts of 'truths'. The choice of which story to employ on the part of Herodotus was dependent on his own agenda. It can be said therefore that the level of bias in the material against which the historicity of the story of Esther is often measured renders the exercise futile at the very least.

Complications arise from the fact that even if Greek writers were "fair" in their presentation of Persia, historiography has undergone several changes over the centuries such that what would pass as historical then would not be accepted as such today.[29] It is no wonder then that very little of what they said could be of use in an attempt at a historical reconstruction of the Persian world by modern standards. Thomas Harrison puts it aptly where he says: 'All these main sources of evidence have their limitations (of knowledge or of scope); all of them *shape* their reader's views according to their own agenda.'[30] Where a people have written their own history; the Greeks, the Jews and many others, modern scholarship still has to work its way through obvious biases and alien approach to historiography. However, it must be stated here that the value of these volumes of Greek writings on Persia cannot be ignored. Pierre Briant warns: 'In this case, we must not "throw the baby out with the bath water."' That is, in reading the classical authors, it becomes the primary task to distinguish the Greek interpretative coating from the Achaemenid nugget of information available and proceed on the understanding that: 'Rejecting the interpretation the Greek writers gave to an Achaemenid court custom does not imply that the custom or practice they were dealing with was simple and pure invention on their part.'[31] The task becomes one of corroboration of sources, one that Thomas Harrison expresses in terms of putting together a puzzle where:

28 P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 16.
29 L. L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Vol. 1*, 3–18.
30 T. Harrison, *Writing Ancient Persia* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011) 19.
31 P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 256.

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> … the object of study can only be reconstructed from – and in a sense may only be constituted by – a whole range of different perspectives: those of the Greek (and other) subjects of Persian imperialism, the administrative records of Persepolis, and the grandiloquent pronouncements of the early Persian kings, especially Darius and Xerxes.[32]

In Grabbe's terms: '*We must use all potential sources …* we should not rule out any sources *ab initio.*'[33] Greek sources on Persian history may not be the best sources one could have but they are valuable sources anyway.

3 The Portrayal of Cyrus in the Light of Biblical Israel's Royal Ideology

A lexical scan of the biblical texts shows that the name and person of Cyrus is mentioned thirty-seven (37) times; arguably a record for a foreign monarch. It must be noted that in most of the cases where the name of Cyrus is mentioned it is only in reference to time or some minor detail referencing some process important in the memory of biblical Israel; for example, the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. However, the fact that his portrayal is consistent with the 'good press' as averred by Kuhrt is equally apparent. For instance, in the book of Isaiah, Cyrus is remembered in very favourable terms: 'Who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose"; and who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be rebuilt", and of the temple, "Your foundations shall be laid"' (Isaiah 44:28).

The continued narrative in the next chapter is even more elaborate in its praise of Cyrus, referring to him in messianic terms (Isaiah 45:1) and with יהוה committing to establishing Cyrus over all nations. Not many, even among biblical Israel's royalty, are remembered in such glorious terms. Memory of the great king David is not as consistently positive as it is littered with moments of weakness and failure, with a parallel tradition of opposition allowed to survive as exemplified in the poetic expression: 'What share do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house David.' (1 Kings 12:16). The Uriah-Bathsheba saga (2 Samuel 11) immortalised in song (Psalms 51), the unrest in the royal family following Absalom's mutiny (2 Samuel 15–19) and other incidents surrounding the person of David betray a memory latent with negativity. The insults

32 T. Harrison, *Writing Ancient Persia* 19.

33 L. L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Vol. 1*, 15.

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of Shimei, a figure associated with anti-David rhetoric, have not been edited out but allowed to survive: 'Out! Out! Scoundrel! The Lord has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood' (2 Samuel 16:7–8). Despite the generally positive portrayal of David in biblical narratives, there seems to be enough repository of tradition to suggest that biblical Israel struggled to come to terms with human monarchy generally and the notion of perpetual reign of the dynasty established by David as specified in the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7). It is on the basis of such an observation that Albrecht Alt's remark can be read as apt:

> The monarchy was not, as is well known, part of the basic structure of the Israelite nation, nor did it succeed at a later period in attaining a permanent position as such, although it was the form of government under which the nation lived for centuries, and which had a decisive effect on its destiny.[34]

The farcicality of a sustained positive portrayal of Cyrus in biblical traditions is exacerbated by the complexities surrounding the emergence of the institution in general and biblical Israel's royal ideology in particular. There is something about the manner in which Cyrus is presented in the biblical texts that reeks of suspicion.

3.1 *Perceptions of the Institution of the Monarchy in the Wider ANE Context*

There may have been exceptions in particular cases but it seems as if a general statement can be made to the effect that a sociological reconstruction of ancient society informed largely by the functionalist theory suggests that the monarchy arose out of the need to fill in a void. In summarising scholarship on comparative mythology, Robert Gnuse offers nine points detailing how the phenomenon of kingship became a part of the body politic of the ancient world.[35] Among other things, the monarchy is credited with such achievements as organizing and controlling resources, nations looked up to their kings to provide leadership in grand projects such as building temples, palaces and

34 A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* trans. R. A. Wilson (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 241.

35 R. Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants: The Biblical Assault on Kings and Kingship* (Collegeville, PA: Liturgical Press, 2011), 1–4.

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fortifying cities – grand so as to be the physical testimony to a people's belief in themselves and generating a feeling of invincibility. It was the responsibility of the kings to muster their armies to protect and expand their territories. At this point it is of no consequence to ask whether the subjects were willing providers of such huge labour; in the traditions that have survived these activities were perceived as benefiting the people. Thus while a palace housed the king, it was a signature to ward off potential enemies as it told of the might of its occupants and their subjects; a great temple would appease the protecting god(s), a wall around the citadel and a strong army were all necessary to protect the people. Dale Launderville treats the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) use of the title 'the people's shepherd' for kings in his discussion on how royal authority was perceived as proceeding from the gods.[36] The title demonstrates the responsibility the kings had to their subjects. There is nothing novel when it is said all the tribes of ancient Israel gathered at Hebron confessed to David, 'The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel' (2 Samuel 5:2b). Biblical Israel simply adopted ANE conceptualisation of the institution of the monarchy, replete with its standard terminology of shepherd and servant of the gods. It is from this background that Robert Gnuse concludes; 'Indeed, the emergence of kings in the ancient world was necessary for civilisation to develop.'[37] The monarchy arose out of the need to serve a purpose.

The striking similarities between the Priestly account of creation (Genesis 1:1–2:4a) and the Babylonian version known as the *Enuma Elish*[38] on the one hand and the flood account in Genesis 7–9 and the Mesopotamian rendering known as the Gilgamesh Epic[39] on the other have received due attention. The cosmological understanding of the ancient Near East was structured

36 D. Launderville, *Piety and Politics: The Dynamics of Royal Authority in Homeric Greece, Biblical Israel, and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3–4.

37 R. Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants*, 1.

38 For a detailed discussion of the *Enuma Elish* see S. Langdon, *The Babylonian Epic of Creation: Restored from the Recently Recovered Tablets of Assur* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), S. Dalley, ed. and trans. 'The Epic of Creation' in *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1989), 228–277, E. M. Thury, Introduction to Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 61–81.

39 For a detailed discussion of the Gilgamesh Epic see, A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (London: Phoenix Books, 1946), N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* Volumes 1 and 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), E. M. Thury, Introduction to Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 192–227.

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around several gods creating the world by way of ordering chaos. The pitch darkness and co-mingling waters of Genesis 1:1 paint a picture of utter chaos before the act of creation. Old Testament scholars have deciphered a plurality of gods in the formative stages of the religion of biblical Israel. Parallels have been drawn with the pantheons of the gods of the ancient world with biblical references such as Genesis 1:26 where God says, 'Let us …', an utterance not readily intelligible if there was only one God. The angelic bodies of Genesis 6 and 32 leave residue of a belief that these were actually gods walking among men. Texts such as Job 1 give a clear picture of a pantheon with gods and sons of gods forming some sort of a council. The various names by which the God of Israel was known and the need for a proper name as expressed in such texts as Genesis 32 and Exodus 3 indicate that in the earliest forms of their belief, יהוה was perceived as one among many gods. Even at the point when ancient Israel had harmonised her gods and rid herself of pantheon-like perceptions, the one God emerging out of that debris is for a while the God of Israel. Thus worshipping and accepting for herself only one as the true living God, ancient Israel did not deny the existence of other gods but only claimed the superiority of her own. True monotheism[40] was not fully developed for a while. For the pantheons to function there was one chief god whose responsibility it was to ensure that the subordinate gods behaved well. Human monarchy was conceived to mirror such a reality. The recurrent motif in the ancient political discourse around the monarchy became: 'the king of the gods commissions the earthly king to rule over a people who belong to the king of the gods; the earthly king accepts and thereby takes responsibility for the well-being of the people.'[41] The monarchy was perceived as serving a divine-established order; in a sense, kings were in fact slaves of the gods.[42]

While political administration has grown to be a secular phenomenon, the cradling environment for the institution of the monarchy is one in which the sacred permeated all spheres of human existence. When understood this way, it makes sense why in the initial stages kings were perceived as appendages of the gods, wielding authority by proclaiming to be the representatives of the divine realm to the people. In some cases, they claimed to be divine themselves as exemplified in the deification of the Pharaoh in Egypt and Emperor Worship in Rome. One case in point is the memory central to the ancient

40 Here I use this term to mean not only worshipping one God but also believing that that one God is the God of everyone else and that besides that one God there is no other.

41 D. Launderville, *Piety and Politics*, 25.

42 S. Smith, "The Practice of Kingship in Early Semitic Kingdoms" in S. H. Hooke, ed., *Myth, Ritual and Kingship: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 24.

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Mesopotamian deluge epic, wherein the character of Gilgamesh is portrayed as a mythical figure with an other-worldly aura.[43] Yet as Andrew R. George demonstrates, the literary, historical and religious traditions about the figure of Gilgamesh included an association with the wall of Uruk, a hero, a king, a god and several other attestations.[44] Earlier on, Nancy Katharine had remarked that it had already been established 'beyond doubt that a man, a king, named Gilgamesh lived and reigned in Uruk at some time during the first half of the third millennium.'[45] The material here cited is admittedly mythical yet important in that it provides a glimpse into the earliest understandings of the monarchy. Launderville's aptly notes: 'Royal authority in the ancient Near East was revered as a gift from the gods to increase the well-being of the community by strengthening the quality of relationships between the ruler and the ruled.'[46] The perception then was that the monarchy was serving the gods; a perception that rendered 'a purely secular approach to kingship hardly possible.'[47] As an example, on a foundation text of an Anu-Adad temple and translated by A. Leo Openheim, Tiglath-pileser (1114–1076 BC) is introduced in this way:

> Tiglath-pileser, the legitimate king, king of the world, king of Assyria, king of (all) the four rims (of the earth), the courageous hero who lives (guided) by the trust-inspiring oracles given (to him) by Ashur Ninurta, the great gods and his lords, (and who thus) overthrew (all) his enemies ...[48]

The rhetoric aimed at making the institutions of political authority unassailable is here borne. To argue that this was a matter of human social structures mirrored into a mythical past and that this was mere royal rhetoric to support their hold onto power may be sustained in modern analytic discourses. Yet at play here is a completely different worldview one that Launderville

43 In the very notion of pursuance of mortality and in the several feats assigned to the character of Gilgamesh, the epic raises the configuration of the character to levels beyond the human realm.

44 A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* Volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 91–137.

45 N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 20.

46 D. Launderville, *Piety and Politics*, 1.

47 Muntingh, L. M., 'The Conception of Ancient Syro-Palestinian Kingship in the Light of Contemporary Royal Archives with Special Reference to the Recent Discoveries at Tell Mardikh (Ebla) in Syria' in *Monarchies and Socio-Religious Traditions in the Ancient Near East* (H. I. H. Prince Takahito Mikasa, ed.,) (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984), 1.

48 A. L. Openheim, 'Babylonian and Assyrian Historical Texts' in J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 4–5.

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describes as characterised by 'the conviction that God or the gods ruled over heaven and earth.'[49] Propaganda is not sufficient to explain the link between royalty and divinity, as that link did not always serve the kings. Often it became the standard by which the monarchy would be measured; kings would need to prove that in their daily conduct they were serving the interests of the gods. Defeat in war, failure of expansionist programmes and even natural disasters such as pestilence, lack of rains and famine would be interpreted as indications that the king had angered the gods who have disowned him and his house as a result. This study will establish that the diaspora experience of the community behind Esther is closely related to an understanding of a failed human monarchy.

3.2 *Royal Ideology in Biblical Israel*

The advent of the institution of the monarchy in biblical Israel is remembered in very mixed terms. Here, as in many portions of the Hebrew Bible, scholars have to grapple with the perennial question of sources or, rather, lack thereof. While the book of Samuel provides a detailed account of biblical Israel's memory of the emergence of the institution of the monarchy onto her political scene, the narratives are difficult to authenticate given that no mention of Israel as an organized political entity or the characters of Saul, David or Solomon has been found in the volumes of texts from the Ancient Near East before the ninth century BCE. Consequent on the non-availability of corroborative evidence for the biblical texts, it has been suggested that the notion of a kingdom of Israel and the monarchical narratives around the figures of Saul, David and Solomon are fictitious creations of the post-exilic period. A lot of attention has been given to the mention of the 'king of Israel' and the 'house of David' in the Tel Dan Stele[50] and that of Omri as the 'king of Israel' and some reference to the 'house of David' in the Mesha Stele,[51] both ninth century texts. I will return to the problems associated with these texts later in Chapter 4 of this study but for now let it suffice to note that mere mention does not match the detail expounded in the biblical texts. It is for this reason that I will employ the biblical narratives here not for their historical value but rather to decipher

49 D. Launderville, *Piety and Politics*, 2.

50 Detail of the finding has been published by the leader of the exploration, Avraham Biran. See A. Biran, 'Dan' in E. Stern, *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the holy Land* Vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Biblical Archaeology Society, 2008), 323–332.

51 W. F. Albright, trans., 'Palestinian Inscriptions' in J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Pertaining to the Old Testament with Supplement*, 3rd ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320.

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the ideological perceptions of the community behind the texts. I intend to use this to measure the margin of deviance in the manner in which the book of Esther and related texts portray Cyrus and his progeny.

On the one hand is a perception very positive in its outlook, especially in relation to the traditions surrounding the figure of David and the dynasty he is remembered to have established. However, as already cited above, on the other hand there is sufficient debris littering biblical Israel's historical landscape to betray an anti-monarchical tendency. The very manner in which the concept of kingship came onto the political agenda is indicative of the negativity that characterised the reception of the institution by this ancient community: 'Then all the elders of Israel gathered together to come to Samuel at Ramah', and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations' (1 Samuel 8:4–5). Biblical Israel's pride as a people derived from a self-perception that included being 'wonderfully unique', making a demand for a king to become like other nations therefore somewhat inconsistent. The Law of the King (Deuteronomy 17:14–20), which sounds like a late imposition into pentateuchal traditions owing to misconduct of occupants of the royal throne of biblical Israel at a later point, betrays an understanding of mixed feelings towards the monarchy. The stipulations of this statute and the reality defining the conduct of most kings in biblical Israel are clearly worlds apart. They went on to amass wealth, married many women – literally broke every aspect of the Law of the King as referenced above. If the institution of the monarchy in Israel can be perceived as a blessing, then it is one that יהוה granted with reluctance.

Disputing the conquest model as rendered in the account of Joshua and vehemently supported by the Albright school, working from a background of textual analysis and employing his extensive knowledge of the geography of the area, Martin Noth dismisses all narratives prior to ancient Israel's settlement where he remarks, 'Israel … cannot be grasped as a historical entity until it becomes a living entity on the soil of Palestine.'[52] The development of the state of ancient Israel for Martin Noth is not in the 'historical' renderings of the biblical narrative but in the ancient Greek concept known as an amphictyony meaning a community dwelling around a shrine.[53] Thus, in the corpus before us as pentateuchal narrative is very little of historical value and we must content with the fact that all we have are confessional narratives of

52 M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York: Harper, 1960), 53.

53 M. Noth, *The History of Israel*, 88. I must emphasise that Noth's 'amphictyony model' did not command widespread acceptance and is cited here only to demonstrate the increasing level of suspicion with which biblical narratives were treated.

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a 'sacral association of the Israelite tribes, an ancient Israelite amphictyony.'[54] Dismissing the rendering of the biblical narrative as well, Norman K. Gottwald uses Marxist/Leninist-like social theories of challenging the status quo to explain ancient Israel's coming into existence in terms of a peasantry revolt. He writes, 'The revolt model offers the intriguing proposal that we can account for much, if not for all, of what the Bible tells us of Israel's entrance into Canaan on the theory that Israel was in fact composed in considerable part of native Canaanites who revolted against their overlords and joined forces with a nuclear group of invaders and/or infiltrators from the desert.'[55] Gottwald makes use of the appearance of the *'apiru*,[56] suggesting their withdrawal into the hills where they would stay without interference from established posts of the political government against which they were revolting. He understood them to be 'characterised everywhere by their negative stance toward the existing social and political structures.'[57] Of interest to me here is the settlement pattern defining political dynamics, which I find representative of the ancient Near Eastern world, and providing the environment of the monarchy's infancy.

Traditions that have survived from antiquity suggest that human settlement was sporadic and comprised little more than the extended family. The monarchy arose out of some arrangement by a number of these families, organising themselves around a shrine, in defence of or to attack for a resource like water reservoir. Fortifications and a sense of belonging extending beyond the strict parameters of family developed out of this arrangement and with it a need to reorganise the community in structures such as family-based roles could not provide. It is in this sense that 'the city' emerged – the fortified citadel that would claim ownership and control of land not only within the bounds of the walls but also that surrounding them. How far they could go claiming possession of lands beyond their walls was dependent on at which point they would face resistance from the neighbouring citadel. The city-state emerged, with the full-fledged state coming into being when several citadels came together by consent or force. It can be inferred in Noth's and Gottwald's rendering that in the ancient Near East and in Palestine particularly, there still were pockets of communities not affected or, at the very least, resisting the effects of a political system that vested authority in the institution of the monarchy. For instance,

54 M. Noth, *The History of Israel*, 88.

55 N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 BCE* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 210.

56 A term used in the Amarna Letters to refer to bands of revolting groups around this period of which the proximity in vocalisation of the word and the term 'Hebrew' has been used to strengthens the connection.

57 N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, 213.

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the biblical narrative is clear that David established the capital of the united monarchy at Jerusalem, which long after the conquest and the establishment of the monarchy had remained a Jebusite city (2 Samuel 5:6–12).

Reference can be made to Ruth to show how pre-monarchical traditions survived beyond the institution. Ruth 4 opens with the words, 'And Boaz went up to the gate and sat there' (4:1a). This introductory portion (4:1ff) shows how an official court was convened at the city-gate. Due to the occurrence of the definite article –ה before שער (gate), we are justified to think of a specific gate, in this case the city-gate. Campbell discusses at length 'the gate' as a distinguished architectural phenomenon in the ancient Near East, coming into being around 950 BCE. Archaeological excavations at Gezer, Megiddo, Hazor and other cities associated with Solomon's fortifications (1 Kings 9:15) give some idea of how the city-gate would have looked like. Edward F. Campbell Jr. offers a precise description of how the gates were structured:

> The gate building proper was a multiple-storied structure with a ground plan having four stone piers topped with brick on each side of the central doorway. The recesses between the piers formed rectangular chambers about seven by fourteen feet in size. Careful excavations by American teams from the Hebrew Union College Biblical and Archaeological School, during the summers of 1967 and 1971, traced low stone bench foundations overlaid with plaster around the three walls of each of the six bays … Here people could sit as they carried out commercial transactions or conducted judicial proceedings …'[58]

In essence, the gate was not only a point of entry into a fortified city but was designed to serve also as a meeting place where formal gatherings could be convened. The implications of this realisation for our enquiry are mainly twofold. First, the finality of the proceedings at the gate with no room for appeal is indicative of a way of life in which communities lived without centralised authority in the office of a king. The idea that the institution of the monarchy was necessitated by the need to maintain law and order[59] cannot be sustained as administration of justice and authority over community affairs remained in the tribal elders. Second, the very existence of a city-gate points to a city-wall, a feature often associated with advanced forms of defence and civilisation. The tribal nature of the proceedings of Ruth 4 suggest that architectural designs

58 E. F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth* The Anchor Bible Commentary Series Vol. 7, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 154–5.

59 R. Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants*, 3.

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often read as hallmarks of civilisation were already in existence before there were kings, 'In the days the judges judged' (Ruth 1:1) to be precise. That the monarchy was necessary for civilisation to take place is a claim that is difficult to sustain in light of traditions such as these. Ruth 4 seems to show that in matters of justice and infrastructural development, ancient communities were well on their way with or without the monarchy. The gate so perceived is of particular interest to us as it is a site of critical events in Esther (2:19, 4:2).

The traditions of the monarchy surviving from antiquity have been preserved at the behest of the kings and, for that reason, it is my considered opinion that texts relating to the institution of the monarchy, be they from the general milieu of the ancient Near East or relating to the monarchy as remembered in biblical Israel, must be treated with suspicion. I have shown in this section that beyond the dominantly glorious portrayal of royal traditions there is ample evidence to suggest that the institution was one perceived in terms of love and hate. The monolithic positive portrayal of Cyrus even in biblical narratives in general and the casting of the Persian monarchy in the book of Esther warrant revisiting. A late dating of Esther (as will be argued later) means that ancient Israel is now decisively inclined towards full-fledged monotheism. The notion that the earthly king shared in the glory of the gods must have been a sticking point for Esther's author and yet true to that notion Ahasuerus yielded a great deal of power. While it may have been typical from a Greek perspective to perceive Persians as a less intelligent people, the portrayal of Ahasuerus as 'fop and fool'[60] must have been employed in the book of Esther as a tool to distinguish the power of the visible human king from the sovereignty and majesty of יהוה. It is from this backdrop that I now turn to look at how the 'good press' Cyrus enjoyed may have influenced traditions about him and consequent interpretations of texts such as the book of Esther.

4 Assumptions about Cyrus and Persia

The foregoing notwithstanding, Hebrew Bible narratives cast the figure of Cyrus and the royal institutions of Persia in positive light for the most part. The book of Esther seems to offer a different view:

> The book of Esther, which, in the form we have it, was almost certainly written in the Hellenistic period (second century BC[E] … diverges from

60 R. Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants*, 125.

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> [the] rosy image; here Persian court=life is presented in a way similar to that found in Greek writers.[61]

The disruption occasioned by the Babylonian exile, at least in biblical Israel's collective memory, included the destruction of institutions of ancient Israel that hitherto had ensured the security of her traditions. Such institutions include the monarchy, priesthood and the temple. In Chapter 1 above, I cited John Bright's reliance on that tradition in stating that: 'The land had been completely wrecked. Its cities destroyed, its economy ruined, its leading citizens killed or deported, the population consisted chiefly of poor peasants considered incapable of making trouble.'[62] Norman Whybray echoes the same sense of an event the magnitude of which is remembered to have been of epic proportions where he avers:

> In 587 BC the tiny kingdom of Judah, the survivor of the two kingdoms into which the united kingdom of Israel had been split at the death of Solomon, succumbed to the military power of the neo-Babylonian Empire. Despite its traditional confidence in its special relationship with its God Yahweh, but in accordance with the predictions of prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, its capital Jerusalem and the other cities were laid to waste, the temple at Jerusalem pillaged and burnt, the king and many high officials executed, and the whole apparatus of government brought to an end.[63]

For ancient Israel, the exile altered life in the most profound of ways. The story of Esther represents a strand of cultural memory emerging from the dynamic of a people whose self-understanding includes a portion of their people living away from home. Whether the details of the story as it now stands represent the views of those domiciled at home[64] or are a reflection of the experiences of those forced by circumstances to live away from home;[65] at the centre of the story are concerns relating to life in diaspora.

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61 A. Kuhrt, The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period Vol. 1, 10.

62 J. Bright, *A History of Israel* 3rd ed., (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 331.

63 R. N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 8.

64 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora' in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (1) (2010), 25–53.

65 S. Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority' in A. Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 45.

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Literature about biblical Israel, culminating into what has survived to this day as the Hebrew Bible, is generally accepted to have taken shape in the aftermath of this experience.

> … the major changes and developments in Judaism and the Jewish people were seminal to the Persian period … the Persian period is the single most important period for the development of Jewish thought and practice from antiquity to the present.[66]

The general consensus within biblical scholarship is that finalisation of the traditions of ancient Israel into writing was necessitated by a need to respond to this disaster. Paula McNutt's position represents many when she states: 'Persian period Judah is the most likely setting for the final construct of much of the material in the Hebrew Bible, even though many of the independent traditions originated in earlier periods.'[67] If there were any traditions circulating in textual form prior to this point in time they were few and a preserve of only the elite. Life during and after the exile ushered in a new dispensation, one without institutions hitherto trusted to provide central guidance to sociopolitical and religious life for the people sharing a common identity in biblical Israel. Committing her traditions to writing became necessary for biblical Israel not only to preserve the said traditions but also as the only means to reach out to the Jews now forcibly scattered all over the known world. The bulk of what we have received as the Hebrew Bible came into being in this era. If authors and final redactors of the texts now constituting what we know as the Hebrew Bible can be located in the Persian period, their works would have had to be shaped by what was held as true in their world. As noted above, Greek historians dominated the epistemological database current to this era for the biblical authors and/or final redactors. Among many other things, notable is the generally positive portrayal of especially the person of Cyrus and the structures he is credited as having inaugurated.

4.1 *The Abrupt Emergence of Persia onto the Historical Scene*

In 1929, Lucien Paul Victor Febvre (1878–1956)[68] and Marc Léopold Benjamin Bloch (1886–1944),[69] French historians based at the University of Strasburg,

66 L. L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Vol. 1*, 3.

67 P. McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 1999), 182.

68 W. Kirsop, 'Luciene Febvre' (1878–1956)' in P. Daileader and P. Whalen, eds., *French Historians: 1900–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 218–238.

69 F. Michaud, 'Marc Bloch (1886–1944) in P. Daileader and P. Whalen, eds., *French Historians: 1900–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 38–61.

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founded a journal entitled *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*, which developed into a platform for a new way of looking at history. The new methodology for historiography is what became known as the French Annales School and was characterised by its critical view of the traditional way of looking at and of doing history that presented a simple chronology of events; 'the narrative of political and military events, presented as the story of the great deeds of the great men.'[70] In a biographical essay of Marc Bloch, Francine Michaud summarises the historian's views in terms that aptly capture the ethos of this school of thought:

> His subtle, clear, and rigorous prose left indelible mark on the discipline of history, as did his methodologies directed to formulating historical problems in social terms. He dreamed of an academic world without borders where geographical, chronological, and disciplinary boundaries could be broken down and human history approached from a global perspective.[71]

In the monumental works of Fernand Braudel (1902–1985),[72] for instance, the school advocated studying very long periods of time: *la longue durée* (the long term). In the works of Braudel, the *Annales School's* methodological agenda on historiography blossomed; it is here that the *Annales* approach 'came to conquer and colonize the international historical community.'[73] As the journal title suggests, the proposed historiographical methodology was interdisciplinary in nature, taking into account the interface of material culture, geographical environment and social dynamics. History was not about individual entities and was not about a series of isolated events. No one individual or a single occurrence would be sufficient to explain how things happened the way they did. Any attempt at historical construction must be multi-faceted, taking into account several shades of experiences; some seemingly unrelated.

When history is understood this way, the emergence of Persia as the dominant political entity of the region becomes incomputable or, at best, problematic. All major empires to have exercised some form of dominance or control of the ancient Near East or some large portion thereof (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome) are entities somewhat well-known prior to their rise. They

70 P. Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–89* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 6.

71 F. Michaud, 'Marc Bloch (1886–1944), 38.

72 E. R. Dursteler, 'Fernand Braudel (1902–1985), in P. Daileader and P. Whalen, eds., *French Historians: 1900–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 62–76.

73 E. R. Dursteler, 'Fernand Braudel (1902–1985), 62.

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would be engaged in acts of resistance against the preceding imperial authorities and their emergence as independent political entities, exerting power beyond their original territorial boundaries, could be explained with considerable ease. The story of Persia is completely different. Pierre Briant aptly questions the reality of Persia's abrupt appearance onto the historical scene:

> In two decades (550–530), the Persian armies led by Cyrus II conquered the Median, Lydian, and Neo-Babylonian kingdoms in succession and prepared the ground for Persian domination of the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia. How can we explain this sudden outburst into history by a people and a state hitherto practically unknown? How can we explain not only that this people could forge military forces sufficient to achieve conquests as impressive as they were rapid but also that, as early as the reign of Cyrus, it had available the technology and intellectual equipment that made the planning and building of Pasargadae possible?[74]

The sudden appearance onto the historical scene and the mercurial rise of a people that became known as Persians warrants investigation.

Daniel T. Potts has noted that modern day discussions on the 'idea of Iran' are dominated by a nineteenth century notion of Indo-European origins such that to suggest local possibilities such as Elam (as discussed below) would be considered anomalous.[75] In other words with Iranian ancestry in doubt, the Persians were not local to the region but immigrants. Potts finds the arguments to support this model rather precarious:

> This is a view which is based generally on notions, few of which are demonstrable in fact, about the existence and location of an original Indo-European homeland, with the implicit understanding that whatever this may have been, it most certainly lay *outside* Iran proper, be it on the steppes of the Ukraine and southern Russia, in the Urals in Central Asia or … in Anatolia.[76]

It is the influx of a distinct Indo-European migrant community that is used to explain the burst onto the political scene of the Iranian Plateau in the first half of the sixth century BC by a people hitherto unknown. There is evidence

74 P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 13.

75 D. T. Potts, 'Cyrus the Great and the Kingdom of Anshan' in V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart, eds., *Birth of the Persian Empire* Vol. 1 (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 7.

76 D. T. Potts, 'Cyrus the Great and the Kingdom of Anshan', 7.

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of human occupation of the region dating back to more than one and a half millennia before the rise of Cyrus the Great and the formation of the Persian Empire.[77] It would make more sense to read the events of the first half of the sixth century BC within the dynamics of a geo-political reality local to the region than speculate over an influx of a conquering Indo-European migrant community. Wouter F. M. Henkelman shares the same viewpoint that where Persia is concerned, '… recent scholarship has repeatedly stressed the local, pre-existing Iranian context as a crucial formative factor.'[78] It is from this viewpoint that Potts dares to suggest the anomalous; to get to grips with the identity of Cyrus the Great and the Persian Empire focus must be placed on the Elamite legacy. Having offered an in-depth analysis of Elamite traditional artefacts evident in Persian culture, Potts concludes:

> In many ways, if one wishes to adopt a cynical perspective, all of the traits just mentioned, whether daggers or scribal conventions, can be regarded as just so many cultural epiphenomena: undoubted examples of Elamite survivals in the brave new, Iranian world of 6th and 5th century Parsa, but epiphenomena nonetheless which fail to convince one of any meaningful Elamite contribution to the idea of Iran or Iranian identity.[79]

While there is scarce information on the settlement patterns of the Iranian plateau for the time leading to and including the Bronze Age, archaeological evidence suggests sporadic and isolated cultures owing largely to the rugged and broken landscape of the region. These cultures, it can be argued in general terms, did not develop into the kind of urban civilisations that were underway contemporaneously in Mesopotamia and Egypt to the west. An exception to that generalization would be Elam, which seemed to match the level and pace of civilisation as that of her neighbours. The major Elamite cities included Awan, Anshan, Simash and Susa, which later became the Elamite capital. Archaeological evidence has shown that Elam, like her neighbours, erected architectural structures known as Ziggurats which were huge pyramid-like structures, attesting to a remarkable technological and mathematical advancement. Elam is mentioned in Sumerian, Akkadian and Assyrian reliefs on trade and warfare. Given the time span involved, it cannot be stated with certainty

77 D. T. Potts, 'Cyrus the Great and the Kingdom of Anshan', 7–13.

78 W. F. M. Henkelman, 'Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Elamite: A Case of Mistaken Identity' in R. Rollinger, B. Truschnegg, R. Bichler eds., *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich/ Herodotus and the Persian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), 582.

79 D. T. Potts, 'Cyrus the Great and the Kingdom of Anshan', 11–12.

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whether the distinction of these cultures can be maintained in a clear-cut manner. Intermarriage, annexations and other forms of relations could have forced mergers at some points and separation on others. Elam is often perceived as a mere extension of Sumer. If Potts' argument of an Elamite background for Parsa can be sustained, then that which later became known as Persia was not completely unknown after all but, rather, it was an entity that emerged out of the dynamics defining the socio-political relations of the region. The tendency to perceive of Persia as defining a complete break with the preceding political administration of Babylon and introducing a new system of governance is not supported in fact.

4.2 *Cyrus the Great's Persian Ethnic Identity Revisited*

One question arising out of the foregoing and one I deem important for understanding post-exilic biblical material such as the book of Esther is to do with assessing the extent to which Cyrus the Great could be said to have been Persian. The dominant narrative emerging from largely Greek sources, in its variations, creates the impression that Cyrus the Great was a child of destiny; born to rule as he inherited royal blood from both parents: his father's line ruled the tiny kingdom of Persia while his maternal ancestry sat at the helm of the equally small kingdom of Media. The stories of his birth and rise to power are legendary in nature and can hardly pass as history even by ancient standards. Herodotus recounts how his birth is revealed to his maternal grandfather Astyages, King of the Medes, and how the consulted Magi interpreted the dream to mean that the unborn child would be a threat to his reign.[80] The 'revelation' is then followed by a long narrative on how Astyages plots to kill the child at birth, how the child survives his grandfather's plots by what seemed to be sheer provision of the gods and returns to his native Persia to take the throne there and eventually march against his grandfather to take the throne as foretold in the dream.[81] In modern day historical reconstructions of the history of this period, this information has not been treated as mere folklore. It is generally accepted as fact that Cyrus became king of Persia in 559 BCE and overthrew his Median grandfather to combine the two kingdoms in 550 BCE. His continued expansionist campaigns saw him defeat many territories including Lydia, much of Asia Minor including some major Greek cities of the time. A modern day Iranian historian, Homa Katouzian, considers the capture of Babylon as the zenith of Cyrus expansionist campaign:

80 Herodotus, 1:107.

81 Herodotus, 1:107–130.

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> But the jewel in his imperial crown came with the conquest of Babylonia in 539, which was the oldest surviving civilization in the region and included Mesopotamia, Syria, Phoenicia and Palestine [establishing] the largest empire that the ancient world had known to that point in time.[82]

With the conquest of Babylon, the Persian Empire was firmly established by the Persian who later became known as Cyrus the Great.

Accordingly, a modern standard dictionary would define 'Achaemenid' as 'Relating to the dynasty ruling Persia from Cyrus I to Darius III (553–330 BCE).[83] There are a few problems with that sort of rendering. By 'Cyrus I' in this dictionary entry, reference is being made to Cyrus the Great whose reign was actually from 559 BC. His father, who preceded him was ruler of the small independent (from Medes) kingdom of Persia, was called Cambyses. This Cambyses was born of a Cyrus; in other words, Cyrus the Great was named after his grandfather, one who ruled before his own father. In that case the numerical suffix for Cyrus the Great would be II, not I. This could be a minor matter as it can be argued that Cyrus the Great was the first to rule Persia that included the Medes. However, much more controversial is the inclusion of Cyrus the Great and his son and successor Cambyses II as part of the Achaemenids. Following the death of Cambyses II, not only is there a disruption in the royal succession line when Darius I (reign 522–486 BCE) took over but also a complete change of systems. Potts notes the paradigm shift the change associated with Darius II entailed:

> But here I wish to approach the problem from quite a different standpoint, not from the highly visible cultural signature of Achaemenid Persia, i.e. the Persia forged by Darius, the first "true" Achaemenid, but from the much less well-known vantage point of Cyrus II, or Cyrus the Great, and his family, about whom much has been written but less is in fact known.[84]

Darius was related to Cyrus' family but not himself an heir who Henkelman describes as: 'a relative outsider, son of a nobleman yet apparently not of royal

82 H. Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Morden Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 30.

83 Taken from oxforddictionaries.com accessed on 26/10/2015.

84 D. T. Potts, 'Cyrus the Great and the Kingdom of Anshan', 12.

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lineage.'[85] Upon Cambyses' death, Darius travelled ahead of the army to reach Persia and formed a tight conspiracy of the seven highest noble families of the Persian Empire known as the Seven Great Houses, with the Achaemenid family as chief. With their support, Darius managed to kill Gautama and ascend to the throne effectively establishing an oligarchy.[86] It must be noted here that 'Persian ethnicity became an important prerequisite for all top administrative posts throughout the empire's history.'[87] This detail has a direct bearing on the plot of Esther as clearly neither Mordecai nor Haman would qualify for the post they hold in the plot, nor could the king have married an unknown immigrant. Darius moved to maximise on the effectiveness of government. It was under Darius that the empire was divided into twenty provinces called satrapies placing pureblood Persians in charge of the satrapies.[88] The concept of satrapies and the consequent elaborate road and postal networks[89] that feature so prominently in Esther find root here. The establishment of an Achaemenid Persia, which could translate to a real change in the nature of the politics of the region at this point in time, does not occur until Darius I. It is from this point of view that Henkelman remarks with notable reservation:

> Recently, the argument has been made that, since dated contemporary Babylonian sources consistently label Cyrus "king of Ansăn," and since there are no contemporary sources that identify Cyrus as a Persian (or an achaemenid for that matter), it has to be concluded that Cyrus was not Persian, but rather the ruler of an independent polity centred on Ansăn which was linguistically and culturally *Elamite*.[90]

Henkelman provides a long note here advising on exercising caution as such a reading developed out of an over-reliance on the rendering of Herodotus about whom he raises the question: 'Can one be sure that Herodotus had an accurate idea of Cassandane's family background and of what "Achaemenid" meant, not only in his own days, but also at the time of Cyrus (more than

85 W. F. M. Henkelman, 'Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Elamite: A Case of Mistaken Identity', 578. Further discussion can be found under Primacy of Darius in *The Histories*: Briant 2002: 107–13. Non-royal background: Rollinger 1998a: 191–2.

86 L. Allen, *The Persian Empire: A History*, 42.

87 J. L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 52.

88 J. L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 54.

89 A. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* Vol. 2, 730–762.

90 W. F. M. Henkelman, 'Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Elamite: A Case of Mistaken Identity', 596.

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a century before)'[91] I have already conceded to the unreliability of Herodotus as a source for historical reconstruction. However, by means of corroboration of sources, I want to point out that it is equally doubtful to identify Cyrus as an outright Persian defining a moment in history when a break with the past is firmly established. Yet it is an understanding of Cyrus as a Persian whose benevolence (flowing down the royal lineage he authored) that has informed understanding of post exilic texts in general and against which the historical accuracy of the book of Esther has been established.

There appear to be instances when the not-so-Persian identity of Cyrus seems to find expression even in what Widengren categorised as biblical Jewish sources of Persian history. Rare but telling details emerge that render Cyrus' clear-cut Persian ethnicity somewhat suspicious. Of the dozen times Cyrus is mention in the biblical book of Ezra, at least once he is referred to as מלכא די בבל literally 'King of Babylon' (Ezra 5:13). In addition, when making reference to the decrees authorizing support for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple made by Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, only the last is specified as King of Persia (Ezra 6:14), a detail that could be in itself negligible. However, the reason given for the joy associated with the first Passover celebration following the completion of the project (Ezra 6:19–22) is revealing in profound ways indeed: '… for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel' (Ezra 6:22b). In this instance Cyrus is associated not with Persia but with Assyria. Basing on numerical strength alone, it can be argued that the author of Ezra remembered Cyrus as a Persian. The fact that the portrayal of Cyrus includes at least two traditions where he is not Persian cannot pass as sheer error; it points to the possibility that his Persian identity, its dominance notwithstanding, could be a result of deliberate construction.

I can only mention in passing here the fact that the meaning of the Cyrus Cylinder is a matter still in discussion. Some variations in perception can be found in Neil MacGregor's introductory essay to John Curtis' work on the Cyrus Cylinder entitled 'The Many Meanings of the Cyrus Cylinder'[92] What seems clear is its assumed connection with a new dispensation breaking off Babylonian legacy, marking a clear discontinuity with the new Persian Empire as ushered in by Cyrus. Having established a physical and content connection between the Cyrus Cylinder and an inscription attributed to Assurbanipal,

91 W. F. M. Henkelman, 'Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Elamite: A Case of Mistaken Identity', 596 note 61.

92 N. MacGregor, 'The Many Meanings of the Cyrus Cylinder in J. Curtis, *The Cyrus Cylinder and Ancient Persia*, 9–15.

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the Assyrian king between 669–630 BCE,[93] Kuhrt concludes that the Cyrus Cylinder was written in support of Cyrus' legitimacy as a Babylonian ruler:

> The main elements used to demonstrate all these facets are the fact that (a) Cyrus was chosen by Babylon's god, (b) that he carried out all the cultically correct activities of a Babylonian ruler, and (c) that he was part of a long tradition of rulers of Babylonia including such kings as Assurbanipal of Assyria.[94]

Again, this observation renders seriously suspicious the conclusion that Cyrus was distinctly Persian responsible for not only overturning Babylonian dominance but also introducing a new government. The balance of evidence suggests that the assumed Babylonian-Persian dichotomy might not have had basis in fact. Though numerically inferior, the references to Cyrus once as a Babylonian king and another as an Assyrian king in Ezra cited above could have more historical relevance than the numerous references to him as a Persian king.

4.3 *Babylonian-Persian Dichotomies*

It is now commonplace that Cyrus the Great is portrayed in very positive light. We have also established that Biblical Jewish sources, in Widengren's categorisation, have not been sparing in their praise of Cyrus. The Chronicler presented Cyrus as the figure used by יהוה to bring to reality the divine promise as uttered in the prophetic traditions of biblical Israel: 'In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: 'The Lord the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up.'" (2 Chronicles 36:22–23 with the same sentiment repeated almost verbatim in Ezra 1:1–2). The Ezra account goes on to provide details of how this benevolent king went beyond mere authorisation of the Jerusalem temple but also restored the vessels plundered by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezra 1:7–8) and offered financial support to the work (Ezra 3:7). In Deutero-Isaiah, Cyrus is

93 The two were found next to each other and in the concluding line of the Cyrus Cylinder refers to Assurbanipal as 'a king who preceded me'.

94 A. Kuhrt, 'The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy' in *JSOT* 25 (1983) 83–97, 88–89.

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introduced in terms that make him on a par with, if not better than David: 'Who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose" …' (Isaiah 44:28). He is cast as the anointed one of God, with יהוה pledging unwavering favour upon his reign and pathways (Isaiah 45:1, 13). It is in this light that Amélie Kuhrt notes of the 'very good press' Cyrus enjoyed:

> He is presented as plucky, honourable and lacking in vicious traits by Herodotus who also provides the interesting information that the Persians themselves regarded him as a 'father' – a term suggestive of benevolence and wisdom as well as underlining his achievements as the founder of the Persian state and first extender of its realm.[95]

The positive portrayal of Cyrus in biblical Jewish sources seems to have been a feature prevalent in the ancient Near East. It is arguably conformity to this general portrayal of Cyrus, Persia and her institutions that makes Frederic Bush describe the author of Esther as '… a narrator who shows himself at every level to be so fully cognizant of the setting and circumstances of the Persian world of his story …'[96] It would be appropriate at this point to ask then: Does Esther's agreement in detail with Greek historians as is the case with the Chronicler and Deutero-Isaiah here translate to historical accuracy or is it simply a matter of conforming to current stereotypes? Again on the basis of the balance of evidence, it seems more than probable that the Cyrus of history is not the same as the one portrayed in what Kuhrt has termed 'a good press' in the sources available. It is not unusual to speak of the Persian period in terms such as employed by Adele Berlin: 'The Persian (Achaemenid) period begins in 539 BCE when, under the leadership of Cyrus, the Persians conquered the Babylonians and became heirs to their empire.'[97] The impression is that the Persian conquest marked a clear changeover of political administration of the region. The evidence available seems to be pointing in a different direction; one where the emergence of the Persian Empire is unclear and complicated:

> Some of the complexity of the world of successive dynasties and interacting cultures that was transformed into Persian empire is revealed instead in contemporary historical sources and archaeological evidence. These

95 A. Kuhrt, 'The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy', 83.
96 F. W. Bush, *Ruth & Esther* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1996), 263.
97 A. Berlin, *Esther*, xxxii.

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> material remains and traditions of pre-Persia empires influenced how the later monarchy shaped itself.[98]

In the light of the intricate relationships of these empires it seems to make more sense to speak of continuity rather than discontinuity. It would seem that the historical Cyrus is best perceived as a Babylonian continuing the legacy of Babylonian kings. The reference to 'Cyrus of Babylon' in Ezra 5:13 must be viewed not as an error but as representing a genuine tradition. His fame must have been local to Babylon as it is here where he effected a historically verifiable programme of reversal to Nabonidus' policies resulting in relief for the citizens of the region of Babylon while for the rest of the empire, business continued as usual.

4.4 *The Return of Babylonian Deportees Revisited*

One celebrated artefact read as authenticating the existence of Cyrus and one Widengren lists among the sources of Persian history is the Cyrus Cylinder discovered at Babylon in 1879[99] and now housed in the British Museum.[100] While the Cylinder's authenticity remains in doubt, its contents offer an alternative perspective to the one so vehemently sustained in biblical Jewish sources of the history of Persia. The first nineteen lines show that, having been disappointed by Nabonidus, it was the god of Babylon, Marduk (not the God of Israel יהוה) who established Cyrus.[101] Lines 30–34 provide details of the programme of restoration of cultic centres, all very close to or even within the bounds of the city of Babylon. Needless to say Jerusalem is conspicuous by its absence on the list of cultic centres provided here and understandably so as it is located too far from the text's centre of focus. The contents of the Cylinder relate exclusively to Marduk, the city of his patronage Babylon and its inhabitants as Kuhrt aptly reads:

> … it is the citizens of Babylon who perish as a result of the maltreatment of the gods by Nabonidus and who lament their fate; it is the actual city of Babylon to which Cyrus is guided and where he receives the acclaim of the people of the country; it is the cult-centres of Babylon whom

98 L. Allen, *The Persian Empire: A History*, 15.
99 A. Kuhrt, 'The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy', 83.
100 British Museum Catalogue No. 90920.
101 I. L. Finkel, trans. 'Translation of the Text' in J. Curtis, *The Cyrus Cylinder*, 42–43.

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> he releases from their burdens (probably forced labour); it is the walls and so forth of Babylon that Cyrus rebuilds, repairs or embellishes.[102]

Furthermore, and contrary to the popular assumption that Cyrus reversed the damage caused by Babylonian deportations by instituting a programme of returning *all* deportees to their respective places of origin, lines 30–32 (often cited to support the said assumption) state that 'the gods (presumably statues) of *specified* places together with their people are returned to their … original dwelling places.'[103] The positive cast of Cyrus must have related to and ended not with benevolence to *all* the people of his empire but with his deemed righteous restoration of Babylonian cultic centres. It would have been a feat aimed at and arguably successful in soliciting the goodwill of the citizens of the most powerful community in the empire; one described by an Iranian historian Homa Katouzian cited above as 'the jewel in his [Cyrus'] imperial crown'.[104] The policies relating to the return of deportees and the imperial interest (and financial investment) in the restoration of cultic centres was primarily for political expediency and, as such, would have applied to cities and communities of some strategic importance.

The extension of that positive portrayal to other writers including authors of the material categorized by Widengren as biblical Jewish sources must have been the case of appropriating an independent tradition in order to tell their own story. It would seem only natural that authors of postexilic biblical texts would have easily engaged in 'judaisation' of imperial policies relating to cities of significance such as Babylon as explained in the Cyrus Cylinder to their own narratives. It is not at all surprising that the result of that process would find expression in the Hebrew Bible, and the consequent picture has the Ezra 1–6 account as normative.[105] However, available evidence does not support the emerging picture. The general geographical area given in biblical pictures as Judah and specifically the city of Jerusalem, was of negligible significance to imperial interests, to have earned consideration alongside cities of strategic importance such as Babylon. Oded Lipschits has noted: 'There are no architectural or other finds that attest to Jerusalem as an urban centre dur-

102 A. Kuhrt, 'The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy', 87.

103 A. Kuhrt, 'The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy', 87.

104 H. Katouzian, *The Persians*, 30.

105 L. L. Grabbe, 'The Reality of the Return: The Biblical Picture Versus Historical Reconstruction' in J. Stokl and C. Waerzeggers, eds., *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter: 2015), 292–307, 292. Grabbe points out that there are so many differences within the biblical sources such that it would not be appropriate to speak of a single 'biblical picture' where it concerns the return of deportees.

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ing the Persian Period.'[106] Grabbe lends credence to the notion that during the Persian era, Jerusalem was not as significant as biblical sources portrayed:

> It was not a Persian fortress: nothing indicates that Persian soldiers were stationed in Jerusalem, and there are no strategic reasons for it to be part of any Persian line of defence … The invasion of Egypt was generally mounted from the Phoenician area. The coast was a vital interest for the Persian but not the interior hill country of Palestine.[107]

Whatever was in the mind of the biblical writers in developing images of the return of deportees modelled around Ezra 1–6, the fact remains that an analysis of the Cylinder and the evidence available lead to the inescapable conclusion that it is very unlikely that Cyrus and the centre of Persian imperial hegemony would have had the sort of interest in as peripheral a place as Jerusalem in the manner rendered in the biblical Jewish sources. Close to the central question of this project, an inference is justified that the significance of an identifiable Jewish community around the Persian winter capital of Susa is equally farfetched.

5 Applicability of Diaspora Terms to the Community behind Esther

While the concept of diaspora comes into being in close relation to the experience of the biblical Jews, the framework of its coinage and the epistemological base underpinning its development are characterised by a clear sense of the nation state. The basic meaning of diaspora, at least in its prototypical sense, necessarily involved movement of a large portion, if not an entire people, across clearly defined political borders. Central to defining the phenomenon of diaspora were two basic building blocks, namely home/homeland and ethnic/religious community. Those claiming or given a diasporic identity needed to show that they shared memory of a homeland, ideally from which they were forcibly removed. Closely related to that memory would be a grave sense of incapacitation where the said community yearned to return to its homeland

106 O. Lipschits, 'Achaemenid Imperial Policy, Settlement Processes in Palestine, and the Status of Jerusalem in the Middle of the Fifth Century B.C.E.' in O. Lipschits and M. Oeming, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 16–52, 31.

107 L. L. Grabbe, 'The Reality of the Return', 295–6.

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but could not as the ones wielding power denied them that choice. It is with this understanding that I raise the question of the applicability of the concept of diaspora to Jewish communities of the period leading up to and including second and first centuries.

I have already made reference to the preamble of the book of Esther, which provides, in geographical terms, a rough map of the territory of the Persian Empire; one that stretched 'from India to Ethiopia' (Esther 1:1). Among the plethora of Greek sources already intimated is Xenophon who describes the territory established by Cyrus in graphic terms: '… the tribes which he brought into subjection to himself were so many that it is a difficult matter even to travel to them all …'[108] The unfathomable expanse defining the Persian Empire at its peak is remembered as an undisputed fact as expressed in as recent a lament as one by Christopher Marlowe dated in the 1590s:

> Unhappy Persia, that in former age
> Hast been the seat of mighty conquerors,
> That, in their prowess and their policies,
> Have triumph'd over Afric and the bounds
> Of Europe where the sun dares scarce appear
>
> CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, *Tamburlaine pt. 1*[109]

Again as already pointed out above, the Persian province of Yehud is included in that marked expanse defining the Persian Empire. The political boundaries as defined here meant that all Jews, whether residing within the Persian province of Yehud, the empire's winter capital of Susa or anywhere else within the empire answered to the same political structure. When read together with the Ezra-Nehemiah traditions, there does not seem to be anything barring Jews from returning home if they so wished. The blocks by which the concept of diaspora has come to be defined seem to make application of the term to the Jewish community behind Esther not so straight forward after all.

The understanding in the story of Esther is that there is only one diaspora, and it is the Jewish diaspora. Whatever the identity of the community behind the story of Esther or the origins of the story, the end product is that of a community with a legitimate claim to the tradition of that one diaspora. The community behind Esther attaches itself to that one diasporic experience of the Jews by way of the genealogical material as discussed above. When Mordecai

108 Xenophon 1.i.4–5 (taken from L. Allen, *The Persian Empire*, 15).
109 Taken from L. Allen, *The Persian Empire*, 6.

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is introduced, he is identified first by his ethnicity: 'Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai …' (Esther 2:5). The trigger to the crisis that defines the plot of the story of Esther can be traced to Mordecai's refusal to pay obeisance to a royal court official and the reason given for that refusal was that he was a Jew (Esther 3:4). In his fury on learning that Mordecai would not bow to him, 'Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus' (Esther 3:6). In all this, the author of Esther shows that there is an identifiable community of Jews languishing in a state of homelessness and now vulnerable to abuse. In identifying the community of Jews at the centre of the crisis with the deportees of 586 BC, the author implies that here we are dealing with diaspora in its prototypical form and their circumstances are not defined necessarily by what Haman can or cannot do but, rather, by the fact that they are part of the 'horror to all the kingdoms of the earth' (Deut. 28:25) as intended by יהוה their God.

6 Conclusion

Given the importance of the Persian period to the traditions fixed in the Hebrew Bible in general and behind the story of Esther in particular, some consideration of the historical reality is pivotal to any reading of these traditions. Complications arising from the nature of historiography make such an exercise not at all easy if not completely impossible. The main argument of this chapter is that by considering multiple sources it is possible, at the very least, to subvert some assumptions, perpetuation of which would impede understanding of the traditions in question. It is my submission that without necessarily disregarding them, concerted effort to sift through the abundant Greek sources replete with biased perspectives on Persia can still yield valuable results. Attempts must be made to balance the picture that emerges from these Greek sources with what can be gleaned from what is available from the Persians themselves. It has been convincingly argued that there is evidence of the existence of Judeans in Babylonia as 'a distinct and recognisable group'.[110] One challenge emerging from that effort is that applicability of modern

110 J. Stökl, '"A Youth Without Blemish, Handsome, Proficient in all Wisdom, Knowledgeable and Intelligent": Ezekiel's Access to Babylonian Culture' in J. Stökl and C. Waerzeggers, eds., *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter: 2015), 223–252, 224. This volume contains several essays that I find very illuminating in my understanding of the Jewish diaspora paradigm, and these I will engage more closely in the next chapter.

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diaspora terminology to Jewish communities in this context becomes problematic. However, it is my view that the strength of a collective memory of a community attaching itself to the Jewish experience, understood in modern day diaspora studies as *the* prototype of all diaspora experiences, justifies the proposal to read the story of Esther in diaspora terms.

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CHAPTER 4

Conceptual, Etymological and Semantic Considerations of the Concept of Diaspora: towards a Theoretical Framework

1 Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to bring to bear the significance of and lay the basis for a theory-centred diaspora reading of the story of Esther. This I will do by arguing for conceptual, etymological and semantic distinction between the terms 'diaspora' and 'exile'. It is an exercise I deem critical, as these are terms that can be argued to be central in understanding the collective memory of the biblical Jews, the community behind what we have received as the Hebrew Bible. I am cognisant of the theoretical discussions on meaning, that is, concerning whether words have any meaning in themselves, independent of what is assigned to them within specific cultural contexts and as defined within the remits of specific time and space. With particular reference to the word 'diaspora', it is commonplace to find it used interchangeably with such terms as exile, migration and population-movement. I am not by any means claiming originality in working with a theoretical framework that presupposes a distinction between these terms. I owe my intuitive inclination to Jon Levenson who, when describing the community behind the Masoretic Text version of the book of Esther, avers:

> Though we cannot be certain of either its date or its place of composition, it would seem reasonable to assume that the book of Esther is a legacy of Persian Jewry and reflects a stratum of society with a very different understanding of Jewishness from that of comparable literature. This is a stratum that has come to terms with diaspora, and indeed, the book of Esther can be read as the story of the transformation of the *exile* into the *Diaspora*. If its author hopes for something beyond the normalisation and empowerment of diaspora Jewry, if he hopes for a messianic advent or an apocalyptic overthrow of Gentile power and a triumphant restoration of the elect to their promised land and to divine service in the Temple, he gives no hint of it.[1]

1 J. D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 15–16.

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While here Levenson seems to be suggesting a sequential relationship where what starts off as an exile would eventually 'graduate' into a diaspora, I will argue that the terms belong to two distinct epistemological categories and need not be seen as related taxonomically or otherwise. I must mention here that, though not necessarily from the same perspective,[2] efforts to read biblical texts in ways that develop from distinguishing diaspora from exile and other forms of migration are already underway in respect of other biblical texts. For instance Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann proposes a reading of the book of Ezekiel that identifies three strands of material, namely: (1) Core traditions traceable to the prophet and consisting of lamentation over the fall of Jerusalem, (2) *Golah* traditions that were based on an understanding that the real Jews were the ones in exile and looked down upon those that remained in the land as inferior somehow and (3) Diaspora traditions in which all Jews shared the same fate of the horror of dispersion.[3] The tension defining the relationship between those that remained in the land and the returnees in the Ezra-Nehemiah traditions included a charge by the returnees that those who had remained in the land had committed the abomination of intermarriage and consequently contaminated 'holy seed' (Ezra 9:2). I will discuss below how preservation of peoplehood is one theme central to the developing discourse on diaspora. I will proceed by raising the implications of the Jewish dispersion narratives' admission that those taken into exile following the Babylonian conquest were the elite. Here I am not interested in the tenacity of Pohlmann's theory but, rather, in the mere fact that he identifies גלה and diaspora as distinct phenomena.

2 The Discussion in Context

I have shown in the literature review in Chapter 1 above that as early as the 1970s, studies in the biblical book of Esther saw articles and monographs being published with the term 'diaspora' in the titles, as exemplified by W. Lee Humphreys' 1973 article.[4] The use of the term diaspora in relation to the study of the book of Esther has been, almost without exception, centred on

2 For instance, in the work of Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann on Ezekiel referenced below, what distinguishes diaspora from exile (*Golah*) is not to be found in a theory-based analysis but rather, as is the case with Levenson cited above, is in the mere passage of time.

3 K. Pohlmann, *Der Prophet Hesekiel/Ezekiel Kapital 1–19* Das Alte Testament Deutsch 22,1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 31–32.

4 W. Lee Humphreys, 'A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel' in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 92. No. 2 (June, 1973), 211–223.

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the fact that the plot and narrative of the story develop away from the Persian province of Yehud. As already noted, in this sort of usage, diaspora is taken to mean, and can be used interchangeably with, terms like migration, population movement and exile – referring to the condition of existence of a people who find themselves having to live away from their places of origin. The second half of the twentieth century is characterised by massive population movements across political borders. These population movements have been highlighted and conspicuously magnified in the world's reality theatre through international media coverage of seemingly isolated incidents of human suffering consequent and central to the modern day developing migration narrative. This is exemplified by the eventful recent incidents of xenophobic unrest in South Africa and the on-going 'migration crisis' in Europe. In a 1996 publication entitled *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah notes:

> As we approach the beginning of the twenty-first century we witness a new phase of mass population movements. There has been a rapid increase in migration across the globe since the 1980s. These mass movements are taking place in all directions. The volume of migration has increased to Australia, North America and Western Europe. Similarly, large-scale movements have taken place within and between the 'South'.[5]

A sizeable portion of the world's population today is resident away from its location of birth, having moved across political boundaries of the country they would ordinarily call home. While within this number, a significant proportion has moved voluntarily as individuals or small family units, attention has been stolen by large-scale groups of people who often move for reasons best described in terms of trauma and characterised by a sense of urgency to render such movement unavoidable. Dominant factors making the movements necessary include war, political instability, famine, economic pressure and natural disasters. Climate change is creeping up at considerable speed as a factor necessitating migration. While this climate change is yet to receive widespread acceptance as a causative factor in population movement, the International Organisation for Migration (IMO) has already published a position statement describing the intertwined relationship between migration, climate change and environment as a 'complex nexus'.[6]

5 A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 178.

6 While this is still a contested area, discussions are already underway. For instance, see 'Research Round Up: Using Mobile Data to Understand Climate-induced Migration available at www.climatemigration.org.uk accessed on 7 June 2016.

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It is the heightened awareness of these massive population movements that has shaped the way in which the phenomenon has grown to be understood and, consequently, use of the term diaspora in relation to many of these movements is now commonplace. Precisely, the use of the term diaspora across discourses, a phenomenon arguably with meaning initially limited to the specific experience of biblical Jews, has increased with notable force in the recent past. It is from this kind of a background that Kevin Kenny has noted: 'Since the 1980s, the term has proliferated to an extraordinary extent in both academic and popular usage, to cover migration of all kinds.'[7] While the precise dating of this phenomenon's proliferation is subject to debate, the fact that the second half of the twentieth century is characterised by a heightened awareness of these 'mass population movements' is beyond dispute. In this chapter (among other things of course), I will explore the concept of diaspora insofar as it has evolved in the last few decades as an independent subject of academic enquiry. It is my working hypothesis that the rise of academic interest in diaspora must be viewed in relation to the modern day increased movement of people across political borders in search of political asylum, work and other opportunities for a better life.

The trauma referred to above as triggering movement from some homeland has continued to impact lives of those on the move, the ones they come into contact with along the way and finally, those who will find themselves having to adjust in some way to accommodate the 'new-comers'. In other words, the whole migration trajectory is marred by a plethora of challenges. James Hoffmeier describes the situation in terms of a crisis:

> You only need to turn on the news to realize that we have a problem. Some might even label it a crisis. It is not just an American issue – illegal migration has become the major social and legal challenge facing the western world in the twenty-first century.[8]

In recent years, the United Nations has instituted a programme called High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development[9] in an attempt to put an acceptable face to the problem of migration across political borders and provide stakeholders a platform for discussion. As Kenny noted,

7 K. Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

8 J. K. Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 19.

9 Summary of the High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development: Note by the President of the General Assembly available at https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/NO6/571/02/PDF/No657102.pdf?OpenElement accessed on 8 June 2016.

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the increased usage of the term 'diaspora' would become a feature common to all sorts of discourses and disciplines, such that to say 'diaspora' has become a buzzword is now only axiomatic. Nevertheless, such is the deemed importance of diaspora as a concept in modern day intellectual discourse that a whole field of academic enquiry has emerged. It is this study's submission that the theories emerging out of this exercise can and should be employed to illuminate biblical interpretation, particularly where it concerns texts such as Esther, which have an admitted diaspora context. Despite secularists' objections to religious and moral codes being imposed on social and legal matters, the interface of the Bible and migration is already well underway. James K. Hoffmeier remarks that such noted objections notwithstanding, the reality on the ground is that various stakeholders continue to appeal 'to teachings, laws, principles, and practices from the Bible, or are quoting Scripture as the basis for the positions they advocate regarding immigration and the treatment of illegal aliens.'[10] In one publication, Hugh S. Pyper 'explores the number of instances of unexpected readings of the Bible in popular culture, literature, film, music and politics.'[11] The tendency to read biblical text as not only normative but also authoritative in matters of interest in current discourse is quite prevalent. Perceived this way, the interaction of the Bible and the migration crisis has been predominantly a one-way matter with the Bible assumed to be capable of informing migration policies. This study aims to turn the tables by employing gains made in the field of diaspora studies to read a biblical text.

It is imperative that I state here that the increased usage of the term diaspora in the last six or seven decades should not be taken to mean that mass movements are correspondingly new. At best, the rise in employment of the term only attests to the heightened awareness of mass population movements in this period. This paper proceeds from an understanding that movement of people to destinations away from places such as they would ideally call home, often resulting from traumatic experience, is a reality as old as humanity itself. I intend to use this admission to allow for an analogous usage of modern day migration narratives to justify a theoretical reading of the story of Esther that is centred on the phenomenon of diaspora in specific terms.

10 J. K. Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 21.

11 H. S. Pyper, *The Unchained Bible: Cultural Appropriations of Biblical Texts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 1.

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3 Conceptual, Etymological and Semantic Analysis of Diaspora

The word 'diaspora' consists of two main parts in Greek, namely δια- and some variation of σπορος; the former being a 'preposition which, when used in compound words, means division and dispersion'[12] but commonly understood as the rough equivalent of the English 'through'. The suffix is closely related to σπορους, the English translation of which is 'seed'. It seems the word 'diaspora' has its origins in an ancient Greek world referring particularly to the agricultural practice of 'sowing seeds'.[13] It is from this backdrop that Kenny avers that the verbal form of that suffix σπειρουν (sow) is traceable to some form of a proto-Indo-European language root *spr* still identifiable today in such English words as 'spore', 'sperm', 'spread' or 'disperse'.[14] It is worth mentioning then that the inclusion of 'sperm' here is on a basis deeper than just an etymological structural connection, but also to do with a prevalent tendency to refer to it as the 'generational seed'. Stefan Helmrich uses the insinuated etymological connection of the word diaspora to sperm to argue for its inherent masculine connotations.[15] Understood this way, the English word 'diaspora' is a derivative of the Greek compound verb '*diaspeirein*',[16] referring simply to the act of spreading, scattering, dispersing or some such notion. There is nothing to suggest that, apart from the physical implications of the verb in spreading and/or scattering (seeds), there is anything special to the term in its regular (or original) usage.

The term seems to have morphed considerably as it was used in the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. There are more than fifty occurrences of some form of the word διασπορα in the Septuagint; more than forty of these in verbal form and about a dozen times in noun form.[17] It is here in the Septuagint, dated about 250 BCE,[18] that the term 'diaspora' was employed to imply a sense beyond the simple agrarian notion of the scattering of seeds in sowing. There are indications of some concerted effort at this point to rein in the concept to

12 E. Sideri, 'The Diaspora of the Term Diaspora: A Working-Paper of a Definition' Transtext(e)s Transcultures. *Journal of Global Cultural Studies*, (4), (2008), 32–47.

13 J. Salazar, 'Online Diasporas: Theoretical Considerations on the Study of Diasporic Behaviour in *MMORPG*s' 2, presented as part of the proceedings of the 2013 Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) available at library.med.utah.edu accessed on 8 June 2016, 2.

14 K. Kenny, *Diaspora*, 2.

15 S. Helmrich, 'Kinship Nation and Paul Gilroy's Concept of Diaspora' in *Diaspora*, 2(2) (1992), pp. 243–49.

16 *δια* (meaning through or over) and σπειρειν (meaning to scatter or sow).

17 K. Kenny, *Diaspora*, 4.

18 K. Kenny, *Diaspora*, 4.

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refer to a specific experience of a specific people at a particular time in history. The rather lengthy warning of the horrible fate that would befall Israel in the event that they elected to disobey יהוה their deity, Deuteronomy 28:15–64, includes a dispersion. I must emphasise here that the tone and nature of the said narrative is about the graphic suffering in store for biblical Israel and that dispersion is only one among many curses. The twenty-fifth verse, while particularly crucial for setting the framework for the use of the term 'diaspora' in the Septuagint, must be read in the general context of the horror themed narrative as cited. In Hebrew, Deuteronomy 28:25 reads:

יתנך יהוה נגף לפני איביך נדרך אחד תצא אליו ובשבעה דרכים תנום לפניו והיית לזעוה לכל ממלכות הארץ

Below is the Greek translation of the Hebrew text and the NRSV rendition of the same, the former being particularly critical in the subsequent understanding of 'diaspora':

δῴη σε Κύριος ἐπισκοπὴν ἐναντίον τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου· ἐν ὁδῷ μιᾷ ἐξελεύσῃ πρὸς αὐτούς, καὶ ἐν ἑπτὰ ὁδοῖς φεύξῃ ἀπὸ προσώπου αὐτῶν· καὶ ἔσῃ ἐν **διασπορᾷ** ἐν πάσαις βασιλείαις τῆς γῆς.

The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out against them one way and flee before them seven ways. You shall become an **object of horror** to all the kingdoms of the earth.

While 'fleeing in seven ways' is an expression that could justifiably create an image of dispersion, it is not to this aspect that the Septuagint assigns the term diaspora but, rather, to the Hebrew זעוה (terror). Evidently, the NRSV rendering 'an object of horror' is an attempt to stay close to the Hebrew rendition. 'Diaspora' in the Septuagint is therefore closely associated with the זעוה that יהוה has in store for biblical Israel in the event of disobedience. Of the seven occurrences of זעוה in the Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 28:25 is the only instance the word is employed outside a corpus that can be read as narrating events of the exile and beyond.[19] It seems here is another instance of retrospective reading as in the case of the law of the king (Deuteronomy 17:14–20), where a reality of a later period in the biblical chronology is inserted in traditions of the Pentateuch. While in ordinary usage זעוה would imply terror or

19 The other occurrences include: 2 Chronicles 29:8; Jeremiah 15:4; 24:9; 29:18; 34:17 and Ezekiel 23:46, all of which, according to the biblical narrative timeline, can be read as accounts of exilic and post exilic events.

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horror of all sorts, the tendency to not only associate it with but also (almost) limit it to the state of landlessness of biblical Israel is a development that would sit comfortably in the exilic and postexilic world – the same period in which the work that culminated in the production of the Septuagint can be dated. Used this way, זעוה serves to distinguish diaspora from גלה (translated in the Septuagint as αποικια) used to denote exile or banishment, presumably with an emphasis on distinct settlements of the 'other' in host territories. The distinction between זעוה – διασπορα on the one hand and גלת/גלה – αποικια on the other is often ignored in diaspora studies, as is the case when Safran places *galut* in parenthesis as the Hebrew equivalent of diaspora.[20] In nuancing the Hebrew זעוה and Greek διασπορα in this manner, I have provided the trajectory by which the diaspora-based theoretical framework central to this thesis has come into being.

4 The Emerging Theoretical Framework

Academic interest in 'diaspora' is a recent development. About five years before Brah's notation of 'a new phase of mass population movements' as cited above, William Safran had noted the conspicuous absence of scholarly attention to diasporas in the discourses relating to ethnicity and migration.[21] It is a reality that was about to change in graphic ways. Employing an internet base tool at http://wwwlib.umi.com/dissertations/search, Rogers Brubaker observed:

> 'Diaspora' and its cognates appear as keywords only once or twice a year in dissertations from the 1970s, about thirteen times in the late 1980s and nearly 130 times in 2001 alone. And the diaspora explosion is not confined to academic writing. 'Diaspora' yields a million Google hits; a sampling suggests that the large majority are *not* academic.[22]

From the conspicuous absence, which Safran lamented in 1991, diaspora has blossomed into a vibrant field of academic inquiry as implied, for instance, by the title of Gabriel Sheffer's 1986 publication[23] with matching public

20 W. Safran, 'The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective' in *Israel Studies* 10 (1), 2005, 36.

21 W. Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return' in *Diaspora* 1 (1), 1991, pp. 83–99, 83.

22 R. Brubaker, 'The 'Diaspora' Diaspora' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (1), 2005, pp. 1–19, 1.

23 G. Sheffer, 'A New Field of Study: Modern Diasporas in International Politics' in G. Sheffer, ed., *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 1–15.

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(non-academic) interest. Once in the public discourse, diaspora became a term 'of fashion', usage of which became completely detached from its etymological background. It is from this background that Brubaker makes the observation that the term 'diaspora', within a short period of time, has moved so far from its centre such that it can be said to have gone into a state of diaspora itself.[24]

Robin Cohen offers, among other things, an assessment of how the phenomenon of diaspora has developed over the years and how it has become a subject of interest to academic scrutiny. In his categorisation, he distinguishes and discusses in some detail four phases in diaspora studies, namely: the prototypical, the expanded, the social constructionist critiques and the consolidation phases.[25] I am reading the genealogical material of Esther 2:5–7 as an attempt by the author of Esther to annex the experience central to the story to the one experience of the Jews responsible for the coinage of the term diaspora, the Babylonian exile. Expanded diaspora explains the added element in the story – the fact that for the larger part, the story shifts focus and develops on the nature of the experience of Jews at the hands of a foreign host. This is a deviation from prototypical diaspora, which explained the circumstances of the deportees almost exclusively on the basis of homeland factors that would have made the move necessary. The author of the story of Esther attaches the narrative to prototypical diaspora by its mere mention, then goes on to focus on the harsh and life-threatening conditions of an existence away from home. Expanded diaspora is also associated with an inherent fractured nature and the need for mobilisation as it is not a clearly definable natural entity. I will show that the community behind the story of Esther reflects a diaspora community, one put together by way of deliberate mobilisation. I now turn to look at how academic interest in the concept of diaspora is developing into some kind of a theoretical framework; one I intend to use in reading Esther. Here I will employ Cohen's model, terminology and trajectory.

4.1 *The Prototypical Diaspora*

Lack of historical veracity notwithstanding, it cannot be disputed that the traditions that have come down to us as fixed in the biblical texts attest to a people yearning for a place to call home. The texts of the Hebrew Bible suggest a community or communities with a real yearning for a place to call home as Helen Lindholm Schultz avers: 'the homelessness of Jews has been the

24 R. Brubaker, 'The 'Diaspora' Diaspora', 1.

25 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* 2nd ed., (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 2–12.

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leitmotiv in Jewish literature, art, culture, and of course, prayer'.[26] Conspicuous in that quest is a memory of a homeland they once possessed and to which they hope to return. In that memory, which can be qualified as biblical history, institutions of biblical Israel such as the monarchy, priesthood and the temple ensuring the security and safety of her traditions became obsolete at the Babylonian conquest.

It is during the course of making sense of a reality of landlessness, which included a memory of an exile, real or imagined, that 'diaspora' as a phenomenon assumed a specialised and specific meaning as discussed above. Until as recently as the middle of the twentieth century, application of the term 'diaspora' was limited to the experience of the Jews: 'First the classical use of the term, usually capitalized as Diaspora and used only in the singular, was mainly confined to the study of the Jewish experience.'[27] In the trajectory culminating in the ballooning of interest in the phenomenon in recent years, that specific and limited use of the term 'diaspora' has become not only an initial usage but also the prototype. This is what Brubaker, citing Gabriel Sheffer, refers to where he avers:

> Most early discussions of diaspora were firmly rooted in a conceptual 'homeland'; they concerned with a paradigmatic case, or a small number of core cases. The paradigmatic case was, of course, the Jewish diaspora; some nary definitions of diaspora, until recently, did not simply *illustrate* but *defined* the word with reference to that case …[28]

The consequent understanding of the phenomenon, apart from being that of limited social application, became one of a 'victim diaspora – the idea of dispersal following a traumatic event in the homeland, to two or more foreign destinations.'[29] It is on the basis of this sort of a paradigm that, very early in its conceptualisation, the word diaspora was applied to the experience of the African victims of the slave trade, the Irish migration of 1845–1852 following a severe famine and that of the Armenians in the aftermath of 'the massacres of the late nineteenth century and their forced displacement during 1915–16, when the Turks deported two-thirds of their number (1.75 million people) to Syria and Palestine.'[30] In Cohen's summative remarks:

26 H. Lindholm Schultz, *The Palestinian Diaspora: Formation of Identities and Politics of Homeland* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.

27 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 1.

28 R. Brubaker, 'The 'Diaspora' Diaspora', 2. See also G. Sheffer, 'A New Field of Study', 9.

29 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 2.

30 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 3.

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> For over 2,500 years, one notion of the word 'diaspora' had been overriding – it was one that highlighted the catastrophic origin, the forcible dispersal and the estrangement of diasporas in their places of settlement.[31]

All these others were accepted as diasporas because they were perceived to have followed the victimhood paradigm; migration was the only alternative in a life-threatening context.

4.1.1 Historiographical Challenges of the Prototypical Diaspora

In Chapter 2 above, I made reference to the 'crisis' that followed Philip Davies' 1992 publication in which historical questions regarding ancient Israel hitherto assumed settled were resuscitated.[32] The questions Davies raised included whether there ever existed an 'ancient Israel', let alone its monarchy; questioning the historical existence of figures such as Saul and David. One ardent critic of this thesis is William G. Dever who summarises Davies' argument as:

> All the texts of the Hebrew Bible in its present form date to the Hellenistic era (as late as the 2nd–1st century). They are therefore "unhistorical," of little or no value for reconstructing a "biblical" or an "ancient Israel," both of which are simply Jewish and Christian literary constructs.[33]

Typical of what has been derogatively labelled the 'minimalist' school of thought, the underlying epistemological base to Davies' theory is the understanding that biblical narratives cannot be relied upon as sources of historical data. Since then, stating that the historicity of ancient Israel must be proven rather than assumed has become axiomatic.

Of critical importance to those wanting to defend the historical relevance of the biblical narrative are archaeological artefacts such as the 1868 discovery of the Moabite Stone, which William F. Albright dated around 830 BC, on the basis of the biblical reference to Mesha, king of Moab (2 Kings 3:4).[34] A translation of the Moabite Stone reads (in part):

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31 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 159.

32 P. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). See especially pages 11–12.

33 W. G. Dever, *What did the Biblical Writers Know and When did they Know It?*, 26.

34 W. F. Albright, trans., 'Palestinian Inscriptions' in J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Pertaining to the Old Testament with Supplement*, 3rd ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320.

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> As for Omri, (5) king of Israel, he humbled Moab for many years (lit., days), for Chemosh was angry at his land. And his son followed him and he also said, "I will humble Moab." In my time he spoke (thus), but I have triumphed over him and his house, while Israel hath perished forever! (Omri) had occupied the land of Medeba and (Israel) had dwelt there in his time and half the time of his son (Ahab), forty years; but Chemosh dwelt there in my time.[35]

The mentioning of Omri, the 'kingdom of Israel', reference to Ahab (though not mentioned by name) and some 'confirmation' of monarchical Israel and Moab in an independent and extra-biblical source is often celebrated as evidence for the historical value of the biblical text. However, in Davies' defence, the disparity in overall perspectives justifies questioning whether the 'Omri' and 'kingdom of Israel' attested to in the Moabite Stone and the one in the biblical narratives are the same. For one thing, 'the Israel' of the Moabite Stone was obliterated in Mesha's lifetime, that is, around 820 BCE at the very latest. Davies warns against reliance on archaeological evidence:

> Archaeologically, we cannot establish what the distinctive cultural characteristics of 'ancient Israel' are. Indeed, it is a moot point *whether, in the absence of the biblical literature, archaeology would have discovered 'ancient Israel' at all.* Archaeology has, of course, discovered new population centres in the early Iron Age, but it has no *archaeological* reason to call these Israel.[36]

Thomas L. Thompson shares Davies' opinion when he describes the problem of any discussion of the origins of Israel as having to do with the fact that it is one 'constructed in hindsight … entirely dependent on the understanding we have of Israel as it comes to us from biblical tradition …'[37] Interpreting archaeological artefacts relating to 'ancient Israel' is too dependent on the biblical narratives, rendering them equally insignificant where it concerns the historicity of 'ancient Israel'.

A close analysis of sources becoming increasingly available suggests that an understanding of a victim-themed diaspora in relation to the experience of biblical Jews is imbued with historical inaccuracies. As Yigal Bloch has shown,

35 W. F. Albright, trans., 'Palestinian Inscriptions', 320.

36 P. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*, 1999 reprint, 16.

37 T. L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (London: Basic Books: 1999), 8.

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data are becoming available attesting to the existence of thriving Jewish communities far afield under Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Rule[38] and if I may add, the existence of which cannot be explained solely in terms of trauma as assumed in the prototypical model. A revised version will show that:

> … the benefits of integration into a rich and diverse culture were evident both to many of the first group of Judeans and to their immediate descendants. A substantial number adopted Babylonian names and customs; the group as a whole used Babylonian calendar and embraced the language of Aramaic.[39]

While the dominant view is that Babylon is a place associated with exile, oppression and suffering; evidence available suggest that, to the contrary, it is during the Babylonian exile and later periods that Jewish religion and culture blossomed, thanks to a multi-cultural environment beyond the context of its cradle-homeland.[40] When Jerusalem and the temple fell to the Romans in 70 CE, Babylon became the undisputed centre of Jewish life and thought.[41] It is in considering this detail and taking into account the well documented existence of the other thriving centres of Jewish activity in the Greco-Roman world, such as the one at Alexandria where the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was undertaken, that Solomon Dob Fritz Goiten avers that there were more Jews living outside the land of Israel than those inside.[42] I will address this more adequately in Chapter 5 below as I attempt a full application of the diaspora theory to the book of Esther by, among other things, providing cartographies of postexilic Jewish communities. For now, I will only state that to speak of the dispersion of biblical Jews as a diaspora – exclusively in negative terms, associating the concept with horror (Deuteronomy 28:25) and laying the basis for a perception of victimhood – must have had its roots beyond the historical plane but rather in confessional or creedal traditions.

38 Y. Bloch, 'Judeans in Sippar and Susa during First Century of the Babylonian Exile: Assimilation and Perseverance under Neo Babylonian and Achaemenid Rule' in *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 2014 1(2), 119–172.

39 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 23.

40 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 24.

41 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 24.

42 S. D. F. Goiten, *A Mediterranian Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Geniza* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971), 407.

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4.1.2 Explaining Historiographical Challenges

The notion of a victim-diaspora in relation to some wholesome experience of the biblical Jews, even if only in collective memory, is such a powerful phenomenon which, if not locatable in history with certainty, still must have an explanation somewhere somehow. Before moving on to the next stage in the emerging diaspora theoretical framework, I will offer a few possible explanations for an understanding of prototypical diaspora that is centred on victimhood.

4.1.2.1 *Perceptions of the Jewish Elite on Diaspora*

First, I will consider the narrative wording of the biblical sources. I must state that this is not a historical consideration but an attempt to use some specification of the said collective memory to offer an explanation to the notion of victim diaspora. I have already noted that while biblical Jews have retained memories of existence outside the land of Israel, diaspora is a concept that became associated mainly with the Babylonian deportations of 587/6 BCE. In one such account, the reader gets the impression that the deportation was a highly selective process with only those from the upper echelons of society affected:

> He carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon; the king's mother, the king's wives, his officials, and the elite of the land, he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. The king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, seven thousand, the artisans and the smiths, one thousand all of them strong and fit for war. The king of Babylon made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah.
>
> 2 KINGS 24:15–17

As has already been discussed, consensus is illusive where it concerns details of numbers and the exact offices of those constituting this 'elite' group. Piecing together with what is known about the presence of thriving Jewish communities discernible prior to this deportation, this must be read as only one of several narratives on how Jews found themselves living outside the land of Israel. However, it is important to stress that this group was special in that it was remembered in terms of its social class – the elite. It is only prudent to read the biblical narratives relating to the reality of exile as, at best, amalgamations of the myths, folklore, legal documents, 'historical' records of an assortment of people with a varied range of experiences. Insisting on victimhood, as the lone central theme of diaspora would be inappropriate. It is reasonable to infer that the narrative of the group that is remembered as elite naturally developed to

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dominate narrative experiences of all others and became *the* exilic narrative for all Jews.

4.1.2.2 *Perceptions of Eurocentric Christianity on Diaspora*

A second possible explanation of the historiographical discrepancies lies in Eurocentric Christianity exacerbating the notion of trauma to Jewish diaspora on account of deicide.[43] To gauge the extent of anti-Semitism in western Christianity and the trajectory by which it has developed, I will focus on a movie directed by Mel Gibson entitled, *The Passion of the Christ.* The movie was released in more than 2000 theatres across North America on Ash Wednesday 25 February 2004.[44] The film's script evidently utilised the story of the passion of Jesus of Nazareth as has been accepted generally as the depiction of the canonical gospels in terms of sequence, places and characterisation. Reactions to the film have been varied to say the least. In the first instance, discussion evolved around the script of the film's adherence to the canonical gospels' rendition of the passion. Second was the manner in which the Jewish people were cast, to an extent to which the film can be labelled justifiably as anti-Semitic. The third area is about the academic concern about the film's depiction of historical reality.

The scene of Jesus' arrest includes the presence of soldiers (John 18:3), and knowing that at this point in time Jews could not have had their own army as they were under Roman rule, these can justifiably be assumed to have been in service of the Roman authority in power at the time. Their presence would place some amount of culpability for what became of Jesus on the Romans. However, if modern criminal procedures can be employed here for heuristic purposes, the arresting force is the police (not the army) and the police force present on the scene of arrest is clearly linked to the Jews: 'with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees' (John 18:3) or 'the officers of the temple police' (Luke 22:52). Throughout the proceedings leading to Jesus' crucifixion and death, the impression is that they were the Jews that were determined to kill Jesus while the Romans were mere unwilling accomplices. Pilate is remembered as saying to Jesus: 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me' (John 18:35). Pontius Pilate would often turn to 'the Jews' to inform them that in his view Jesus had not committed a crime to warrant the death penalty. He even went out of his way to offer to have him flogged (Matthew 27:26, Mark 15:15). Yet such was the determination of the

43 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 24.

44 Z. Garber, 'Introduction' in Z. Garber, ed., *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy and Its Implications* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006), 1.

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Jews that they would not accept anything less than his death. There is a latent condemnation in the tradition of the gospels that places culpability of Jesus' death on the Jewry of his time; a condemnation 'the Jews' willingly embraced and even extended to its posterity with the declaration: 'His blood be on us and on our children' (Matthew 27:25). Pilate washes his hands as a symbol of his non-involvement in what is about to unfold declaring in plain terms: 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves' (Matthew 27:24). Thus a reading of the passion narratives that places the responsibility of Jesus' death on the Jews is in a sense justified. Irving Greenberg remarks: 'The Gospels themselves, literally understood, generate hatred (and worse) vis-a-vis Jews, living and dead.'[45] In the movie, Gibson puts this sort of reading to maximum use; for example, he introduces the figure of Satan at the beginning of the film which is seen throughout the movie co-mingling with a clearly identifiable Jewish mob going 'beyond the Gospels in demonising Caiaphas and company.'[46] If crucifying Jesus was a crime, then the film was developed with a clear distinction between the guilty Jews (especially the temple leaders) and the innocent Romans as represented by Pilate and his wife. Casting Jews as a people determined to have Jesus killed has given rise to accusations of anti-Semitism against the film. However, in his defence, Gibson did not wander far off from the rendition of the gospels' respective passion narratives.

While violence on the person of Jesus is implied in the canonical gospels and could be reconstructed historically (with some reasonable degree of probability), still, the magnitude of brutality conveyed in the movie goes way beyond that conveyed in the sources, that is if the canonical gospels were his only sources. Using imagery of an imaginary rape case, Crossan argues that at the centre of this discussion should not be the film's historical probability but rather its tendency towards outright pornography:

> Imagine the horror of a two-hour gang rape … If there were no video, and a director re-enacted it from the court records, enacted it exactly as it happened over those two hours, would doing that and watching it not be pornography? *In other words, when does the sustained depiction of a sadistic action become itself obscene or pornographic?* Even if – or especially if – it actually happened that way? The question is not whether

45 I. Greenberg, 'Review of The Passion of the Christ' in Garber, Z., *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy and Its Implications* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006), 9.

46 J. Miles, 'The Art of The Passion' in T. K. Beal, and T. Linafelt, eds., *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion, Popular Culture, and The Passion of the Christ* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 16.

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> scourging and crucifixion were savage (of course they were!) or whether Jesus suffered terribly (of course he did!) but whether this film's unrelenting sadism is gratuitously overdone.[47]

If the violence depicted in the movie is not readily discernible from the pages of the gospels, the question then becomes whether it was all down to the director's creative genius. It must be noted that Gibson is a confessing Catholic (however devout) and it is critical (but not surprising) to note that the title of the film has the title 'Christ' and not the name 'Jesus', a significant pointer to the confessional inclination of the whole project. The theology underpinning this film is to be understood within a specific ecclesiastic framework. The inscription on the blank screen that opens the movie is a quotation from Isaiah 53. The gospels, in all their variations, present the story of Jesus' passion. While Jesus' suffering is assumed, the canonical gospel narratives of the passion seem to underplay it. Neither does the suffering motif appear to feature with any prominence in the early Church where the dominating message centred on 'the risen Lord'. The shift of focus from the message of the canonical gospels to that of Jesus as the 'suffering servant' is evidently a late development, traceable to the medieval age with a surge of literature and doctrinal material coming through to that effect.

One critical piece of literature in this special genre is a publication attributed to the visions and meditations of an eighteenth to nineteenth century nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich, entitled *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*.[48] In a reprint of the book well after the release of the film, it comes with a clear inscription on the front cover, which reads: 'An inspirational source for the movie *The Passion of the Christ*', confirming Crossan's lament and chide:

> If Mel Gibson were to receive a Best Director Oscar for this film, it could well be argued that Emmerich should get a Best Adapted (or should it be Original) Screenplay. If accuracy or even courtesy were followed, the opening credit should read: 'A Mel Gibson Film,' followed by 'Based on the Book by Anne Catherine Emmerich.'[49]

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47 J. D. Crossan, 'Hymn to a Savage God' in Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb, eds., *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History* (London: Continuum, 2004), 14.

48 A. C. Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* Reprint (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004).

49 J. D. Crossan, 'Hymn to a Savage God' 17.

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Anne Catherine Emmerich, an Augustinian nun, was born on 8 September 1774 and raised in a poor peasantry background in Coesfeld, South Germany. She exhibited mystic tendencies from early childhood with very pleasant visions of Saint Mary and a host of other saints. From about the age of eighteen to her death on 9 February 1824,[50] she was a very sick woman and, coincidentally, the nature of her visions became more grotesquely sadistic. She suffered mysterious bodily harm, the sort that have been called 'Stigmata', which looked like fresh bleeding nail wounds in the palms such as those believed to have been suffered by Jesus on the cross. With the support of political and ecclesiastic authorities of the time, a renowned writer sat in her attendance and would later write down his version of her vivid hallucinatory visions of Jesus' passion. These are the recordings that made possible the publication of the said book more than one hundred years ago. No claim is made to historicity or to loyalty to the canonical gospels' narratives of the passion of Jesus. Instead what we have in the editorial introduction is a disclaimer; '… but it is our duty here plainly to affirm that they have no pretensions whatever to be regarded as *history* … To these meditations, she herself never attached more than a mere human value'.[51] Very close similarities can be drawn between the details of this work and the scenes of the movie in discussion especially at those points where the movie exaggerates the intensity of Jesus' suffering in relation to the gospels' accounts. For those denying Gibson's claims to historical accuracy and loyalty to scripture, this book is the obvious alternative.

It must be noted here that the work of Anne Catherine Emmerich and the movie discussed above are only representations of a perspective that took centuries to mature and continued well after her time. The identification of Jews as 'enemies of humanity' and their subsequent persecution under the Nazis' campaign during the Second World War was not a random occurrence but, rather, a culmination of a long growing tradition of vilifying the Jews on account of deicide. In the General Press' translation of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, he confesses:

> And so I believe to-day that my conduct is in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator. In standing against the Jew I am defending the handiwork of the Lord.[52]

50 A. C. Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion*, 61.

51 A. C. Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion*, 11.

52 A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf: My Struggle* (New Delhi: Geeneral Press, 2013), 67.

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Conscious of the anti-Semitic mentality traceable to the Scriptures but evolved to clear magnitudes over the years with its traditions and horrified by the experience of the holocaust, in the proceedings of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church approved several documents. One of these is entitled *Nostra Aetate*, which included a statement absolving Jews as a people of the crime of deicide:

> True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews without distinction, then alive, nor against Jews today … Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time by anyone.[53]

The statement does not say that 'the Jews did not commit deicide' but only that they are pardoned. In the eyes of western Christianity then, the suffering of the Jews and the *za'avah* of their dispersion developed to be understood as a direct consequence of their crime of deicide. The notion that the *za'avah* of the Jewish dispersion has been in service of a sentence for the crime of deicide has been central in promoting a conceptualisation and buttressing of the Jewish dispersion memory and narratives as centred on victimhood.

4.1.2.3 *Perceptions of Classical Islam on Diaspora*

While Jews (and Christians), both known in the Koran as *dhimmi* (the subservient people) enjoyed several privileges protected under the Pact of Omar which was established around 800 CE in Muslim-controlled territories, Cohen notes the rather tenuous relationship between Muslims and Jews right from the onset.[54] In the period leading to the turn of the seventh century CE, the modern day Islamic city of Medina was a community established and wholly made up of Jewish date farmers.[55] In a case similar to that of the Christian tradition, Muslims have the memory of the Jewish community of Medina refusing Mohammed hospitality and rejecting his message. Subsequent narratives

53 Pope Paul VI 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' *Nostra Aetate* (28 October 1965) available on www.vatican.va/archive/hist.councils/iivaticancouncil/documents/vat-ii_deci_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html accessed on 25 November 2011.

54 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 28.

55 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 28.

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cast Jews in negative terms as a people deserving to suffer. It is from this background that, citing the work of Richard Marienstras,[56] Safran notes:

> For Jews, diaspora has had a specific meaning historically – that of exile under conditions of minority status and of powerlessness. It has also connoted a continuing sense of insecurity, for Jews have been the proverbial Other in terms of religion, dress, customs, cuisine, and language, so that that they have constituted convenient scapegoats and have been subject to forcible conversion, expulsion, and massacres.[57]

It is not surprising then that the subsequent Islamic narrative found it justifiable that in 622 CE Mohammed returned, having found favour and mobilised the surrounding Arab communities, and virtually annihilated the Medina Jewish community.[58] The historical accuracy of this tradition is not important here but, rather, the fact that that narrative aids in sustaining a perception that Jews were a stubborn lot that resisted the continued revelations of the God of the Abrahamic faiths.

4.1.3 Summary of the Effects of the Discussed Perceptions

Therefore, in all the three major Abrahamic faiths there is this sustained perception of the suffering of the Jews as God-induced. It is with this in mind that Safran notes: 'Exile has been considered the "normal" condition of the Jews – either as punishment for their sins against God (according to Jewish religious belief) or their refusal to accept Jesus as their Saviour (the Christian conception).'[59] When the referred Islamic memory of the Jews' refusal to provide hospitality to and accept the message of the Prophet Mohammed at Medina is added to that mix, then we have the two dominant religious traditions pepping up an idea already inherent in the traditions of the Jews (Deuteronomy 28:25). Resultantly, an understanding of Jewish dispersion as a matter replete with spiritual and theological undertones became a matter of fact. The position of the Jewish diaspora as the prototype and a construction of that understanding as victim based became unassailable. The consequent epistemological framework completed the morphing of the term diaspora from one denoting an ancient agricultural practice of scattering seeds to a

56 R. Marienstras, 'Sur la notion de diaspora' in Gérard Chaliand, ed., *Les minorities à l'âge de l'État-nation* (Paris: Fayard, 1985) 215–226, 215–218.

57 W. Safran, 'The Jewish Diaspora', 38.

58 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 28.

59 W. Safran, 'The Jewish Diaspora', 38.

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concept associated almost exclusively with a memory of Jewish dispersion as a victim diaspora. In summation, the emergent formulaic expression for diaspora at this stage would have the following three components: (i) there has only been one Diaspora (capitalised) in human history which is the one found in the narrative memory of the biblical Jews, (ii) Diaspora is a concept that makes sense only in so far as it rests on the fundamental pillars of (a) an identifiable centre of origin (homeland) and (b) an identifiable group of people (ethnic/religious community) and (iii) the conditions of departure from homeland are associated with trauma, creating a victimhood perception for the displaced community. This became the paradigmatic model for understanding diaspora. The early considerations of African (slave trade), Irish (famine) and Armenian (ethnic cleansing) experiences and subsequent inclusion of other groups in the Expanded Concept stage, as will be discussed below, depended on strict adherence to this paradigm.

4.2 *Expanded Concept of Diaspora*

Despite efforts to portray the Jewish diaspora as not only prototypical but also *the* only diaspora,[60] the foregoing discussion demonstrates that understanding to have been a result of deliberate construction. It goes without saying then that an exclusive application of the term diaspora to the Jewish dispersion was unsustainable, for the same basis by which the said construction in respect of the Jewish experience (real or imagined) was construed, the same could be applied to experiences of other people. I have shown that already within the framework of the Prototypical Diaspora, the African, Irish and Armenian experiences were being considered as diasporas of sorts. Without taking away anything from the paradigmatic effect of the Jewish diaspora, the early inclusion of the stated three historical experiences showed that 'many other ethnic groups were experiencing analogous circumstances due perhaps to the difficult circumstances surrounding their departure from their places of origin and/or as a result of their limited acceptance in their places of settlement.'[61] It is in the reference to analogous experience of other people that the methodological framework underpinning this research has been developed as will be applied closely in Chapter 5 below. At this point let it suffice to say that the term diaspora was now being applied to refer to experiences of several other groups of people, in James Clifford's notation, respecting and recognising 'the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that

60 R. Brubaker, 'The 'Diaspora' Diaspora', 2.
61 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 4.

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history a definitive model.'[62] It must be noted also that in these extensions, the paradigmatic effect of the Jewish diaspora became attenuated inevitably.

In opening up the concept to include circumstances of other people whose experiences could be argued as similar to that of the Jews as explained above, by the 1980s discussions on diaspora spiralled uncontrollably to levels of meaninglessness. Cohen describes the danger of opening up the concept of diaspora in terms of 'a journalistic free-for-all'[63] where all sorts of experiences can be described in diasporic terms. It is from this same background that the term then assumed in William Safran's observation, a metaphoric designation where it was employed to cover all sorts of people: expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and minorities *tout court*.'[64] The ability of the concept 'diaspora' to command academic interest remained acutely limited for as long as it was perceived as a phenomenon limited in meaning to the experience of the biblical Jews as discussed under Prototypical Diaspora above. This is because anthropological and social science discourses tend to pay attention to such phenomena as would apply to a wide range of the human condition. It must be stated rather categorically here that the increased awareness of mass population movements[65] (a lot with affinity to the trauma associated with the memory of that of the biblical Jews, replete with the sense typical of victim diaspora) and the proliferation of the term diaspora in academic discourses are related developments. In breaking off from the strict and limited phenomenon with exclusive application to biblical Jews, diaspora became associated with a general condition of the human species.

For reasons of wanting to make such generalisations and make the phenomenon of diaspora fit into a paradigm such as would make it of academic use, Walker Connor broadened its scope in his studies to include 'that segment of a people living outside the homeland.'[66] The need for *en masse* dispersion became a natural casualty. The question of the conditions of departure, with its considerations of trauma, victimhood and population proportion dropped in importance, as the mere fact of living away from one's homeland became central. The phenomenon was now fully open to all sorts of migrant communities. Safran puts it more plainly when he avers:

62 J. Cliffton, 'Diasporas', 306.

63 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 4.

64 W. Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return' in *Diaspora*, 1 (1) (1991), 83.

65 A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 178.

66 W. Connor, 'The Impact of Homelands upon Diasporas' in G. Sheffer, ed., *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (New York: St Martin's, 1986), 16.

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> Lest the term lose all meaning, I suggest that Connor's definition be extended and that the concept of diaspora be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "centre" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should collectively be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.[67]

In the prototypical phase, diasporic experience could be explained primarily if not exclusively in terms of traumatic disturbances in the homeland. In Connor's definition and Safran's expanded version, the concept of diaspora became associated not only with the traumatic conditions of departure from homeland but also (if not more so) with the harsh conditions defining life in the destination communities.

Limited acceptance in destination communities, often finding expression in deskilling, exploitative employment arrangements and general stripping of human dignity of the migrant, has sustained the notion that for any migration to result in a diaspora, it must carry with it some element of 'horror before the nations'. Levenson's reference to a progression from exile to diaspora must be read as a matter of making the best out of a bad situation. Diaspora is not at any point desirable. Safran notes:

> Diaspora … connoted deracination, legal disabilities, oppression, and an often painful adjustment to a host-land whose hospitality was unreliable and ephemeral. It also connoted the existence on foreign soil of an expatriate community that considered its presence to be transitory.[68]

67 W. Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies', 83.
68 W. Safran, 'The Jewish Diaspora', 36.

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Such a conceptual vicissitude opened up the term, allowing all sorts of groups of people to either apply the term to themselves (emic) or have it applied to them (etic). One example that can be cited here is that of the nineteenth century system of indentured labour when the governments of strong economies such as Britain and the USA found themselves needing manpower after the successful antislavery campaign. While the resultant recruitment practices would not measure up to modern day human rights standards, it is still true that those that left their homelands did so voluntarily and had a theoretical right to return home if they so wished. It must also be noted that those that answered to the lure of indentured labour recruitment programmes were only a small fraction of their homeland population. To the numbers of indentured labourers were added those that came later to look for work, trade and business. In the end there emerged identifiable immigrant/expatriate communities in the destination countries, which were now admissible under the expanded concept of diaspora. However, the paradigmatic effect of the experience of biblical Jews remained intact:

> Still, the Jewish diaspora continues to be used as prototype because it combines such features as ethnicity, religion, minority status, a consciousness of peoplehood, a long history of migration, expulsion, adaptation to a variety of host lands whose welcome was conditional and unreliable, and a continuing orientation to a homeland and to a narrative and ethnosymbols related to it.[69]

While the second phase dubbed the Expanded Concept of Diaspora witnessed an opening up of the application of the concept to a lot more groups of people, it did not wander far off conceptually from the perception of the Jewish diaspora as the prototype.

4.3 *Social Constructionist Critiques of Diaspora*

In the first two stages of the diaspora theoretical framework discussed above, with the experience of biblical Jews as a critical prototype, the connection between 'diaspora' and some physical 'homeland' (real or imagined) is unassailable. Closely linked to that connection is the notion of forcible and traumatic removal from a homeland, giving rise to the centring of diaspora on victimhood. Proponents of theoretical framework centred on the paradigmatic effect of the Jewish diaspora must have been aware that the extension begun in the second phase above would not be the end of the process. As early as 1994,

69 W. Safran, 'The Jewish Diaspora', 39.

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James Clifford already noted: 'Jewish (and Greek and Armenian) diasporas can be taken as non-normative starting points for a discourse that is travelling or hybridizing in new global conditions.'[70] The third stage in the trajectory definitive of a theoretical framework on diaspora came about in the context of social constructionist critiques of diaspora. Discussions ensuing at this stage left the paradigmatic effect of the Jewish diaspora ripped asunder as Brubaker observed: 'the reference to the conceptual homeland – to classical diasporas – has become attenuated still, to the point of being lost all together.'[71] A physical homeland becomes an unnecessary concept in the emerging discourse and, with it, also need for traumatic removal and consequent feeling of victimhood. For those fleeing political tensions and economic meltdowns, finding refuge in the security of more stable political and economic environments is looked at quite favourably. As will be shown in the Zimbabwe analogy used for application in Chapter 5 below, migration is perceived by many as one of the few realistic means by which to climb up the economic ladder and as such, something to embrace and celebrate. Parties are thrown for getting a visa, being granted leave to remain becomes a *de facto* blessing. On 6 January 2010, Alex Magaisa, a Zimbabwean lawyer/socio-political analyst and academic currently based at the University of Kent, posted an online article in which he noted the term diaspora's application within the context of the popular discourse in Zimbabwe:

> Throughout history the land that is now Zimbabwe has had its phases of migration. People have come and gone. But it wasn't until the last decade that the word 'Diaspora' was popularly assigned to migrants who left the country. 'Diaspora' doesn't just represent a people – the place itself is known as *kuDiaspora*. So people say, '*akaenda ku Diaspora*' (he went to the Diaspora). This word is now an integral part of the national vocabulary, complete with its own meanings and usages unique to Zimbabwe …[72]

In a manner of speaking, the term diaspora has taken leave of its original conceptual, etymological and semantic sense particularly in the popular discourse.

The third stage in the development of a theoretical framework for diaspora studies revolved around the emerging social constructionist critique overtones, initially a thing of popular discourse but now making decisive inroads into academic usage:

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70 J. Clifford, 'Diasporas' in *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (3), pp. 302–338, 306.

71 R. Brubaker, 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora' 2–3.

72 A. Magaisa, 'Zimbabwe: The A to Z of a Lost Decade' found at www.zwnews.com accessed on 7 January 2010.

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> One can hardly do anything about the spread of the expression in popular discourse, but perhaps it is appropriate to show how, in servicing their own agendas and adopting an unchallenging social constructivist position, some academics unduly privileged the emic over the etic and showed scant respect for the etymology, history, limits, meaning and evolution of the concept of diaspora.[73]

It is a development Cohen links directly to an active deconstruction of the original building blocks for understanding the concept of diaspora, that is, homeland and ethnic/religious community. For instance, in the already cited work of Avtar Brah, homeland became merely homing desire needing not to be associated with a particular geographical or physical place.[74] Without the need for a physically locatable homeland, the concept of 'home' has been loosely interpreted to mean all sorts of categories including even 'an imagined virtual community (linked for example, through the internet).[75] It is in this regard that Javier Salazar avers that the '*complex, dispersive and migratory behaviour* some online groups may exhibit could signify that there are, in essence, a new form of diaspora – namely *online diaspora.*'[76] At this point in the trajectory, the traditional understanding of diaspora is completely set aside. Migration from a centre or homeland became so unnecessary such that it became possible to consider as diasporas communities that never moved. That implication is explicit in Safran's protest to the notion of diaspora without movement as it was now being applied 'to refer to the Québécois, Spanish Basques, or Tamil Sri Lankans as diasporas: they have not been dispersed, but they wish political independence in the land in which they have remained.'[77] It can be argued that Social Constructionist Critiques of Diaspora is a stage borne out of a wave traceable to an epistemological base characterised by resistance and postcolonial thought forms. Conceding to the futility of a consensus in defining diaspora, David Chariandy proffers instead the hopes of the generality of theorists working around the field:

> … all seem to share these hopes: that diaspora studies will help foreground the cultural practices of both forcibly exiled and voluntarily migrant peoples; that diaspora studies will help challenge certain calcified

73 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 9.
74 A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 192.
75 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 10.
76 J. Salazar, 'Online Diasporas', 1.
77 W. Safran, 'The Jewish Diaspora', 39.

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> assumptions about ethnic, racial, and, above all, national belonging; and that diaspora studies will help forge new links between critical methodologies and contemporary social justice movements.[78]

The 'nation state', which was essential in understanding 'homeland' in earlier configurations of diaspora, was too closely linked to the hegemonic structures that the social constructionist discourse was protesting in the first place. Voices from the margins – feminist/womanist, postcolonial, black, gay, etc. – found the conceptualisation of diaspora too close to the categorisations of power framed to sustain the hegemonic status quo.

4.4 *The Consolidation Phase*

In the Social Constructionist Critiques of Diaspora phase, diaspora studies got to what could pass as a point of crisis. Diaspora Studies, as an academic discipline, is now faced with two clear polarities: on the one hand there is a social constructionist position that makes diaspora a free-for-all concept and on the other is one inclined towards limiting the concept to its etymology and history, applying it only to those communities meeting a limited list of criteria. The central question has now become: would diaspora still be diaspora if it were to be conceived outside the context of its historical development, more especially, without its traditionally accepted building blocks of homeland and ethnic/religious community? About a century ago, identities were clear-cut with race, ethnicity and religion playing such pivotal roles in underlying socio-political order in a clearly developed sense of the nation state. The concept of diaspora, with its putative 'groupness' would be correspondingly easy to skirt in such a context. It is not surprising then that the prototypical victim slant with distinct and unmistakeable building blocks dominated initial understandings of the concept of diaspora with considerable ease. Conceptual frameworks of diaspora based on some notion of a physical centre (homeland) and a clear cut group identity (ethnic/religious community) were not only easy to construct but were the only known means by which individuals would be identified and human relationships could be explained. That has evidently changed. Beyond families, clans, tribes and the national states; powerful and definitive human relationships are forming around professions, sports, internet-based gamerooms, sexuality, gender, just to mention a few. The world today is characterised

78 D. Chariandy, 'Postcolonial Diasporas' in *Postcolonial Text*, North America, 2, Dec. 2005. Available at http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/440/839. Date accessed 3 June 2016.

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by 'intersectionality, multiculturality and fluidity.'[79] The traditional building blocks for understanding diaspora, in a sense, have lost their solidity:

> Where is home? On the other hand, home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day … all this as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations.[80]

Home is anywhere and kinship can be with anyone for all sorts of reasons. Having been born in Zimbabwe and having spent more than half of my adult life as a permanent British resident, I am currently in communication more with my supervisors, staff and colleague students in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College London than I am with members of my extended family let alone clan or tribe. I am likely to feel more diasporic at leaving King's College London than I feel now for living outside Zimbabwe.

With the traditional building blocks of homeland and ethnic/religious community removed, arriving at a definition of diaspora such as would command widespread acceptance becomes a chimera. It is for this reason that Eleni Sideri suggests, as an alternative, looking to 'studying the conditions that produce diasporas as socio-political and academic categories'.[81] The consolidation phase aims at establishing a working definition of diaspora that takes into account the concerns of the opposing sides. The starting point for such an exercise it would seem, is to state what diaspora studies as an academic discipline is not:

> Diaspora theorists made no claim to explain the full spectrum of immigrant experiences, did not see their task as creating a progressive anti-racist movement (desirable as that may be), and did not seek to describe patterns of sociality and citizenship unrelated to some degree of prior kinship or religious affiliation. In other words, the concept of diaspora is not a magic bullet and cannot be used to slay all enemies.[82]

79 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 9.
80 A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 192.
81 E. Sideri, 'The Diaspora of the Term Diaspora', 33.
82 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 11.

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The chosen solution in the consolidation phase is to establish some sort of middle ground by taking a bit from each of the two sides.

One possibility would have been to allow the difference of opinion to rage on, hoping that in the polarised tensions some new thesis would emerge. It seems that diaspora theorists have chosen to actively engage and find some way to resolve the crisis. Representing the consolidation trend is the editor of the journal *Diaspora*, Khachig Tölölyan, who writes:

> Diasporists shaped by globalising discourses describe genuine erosions of the link between a bounded place and a people, diagnose it as irresistible, and pluralistic, multicultural, hybrid world of which they approve. Diasporists like myself, who want to argue that attachment to a place was indispensable to diasporic life and thought until very recently, and that despite its erosion it remains important today, must tread carefully in order to avoid the charge that we are either imitating discredited nationalist rhetoric about the link between land, people, and culture, or that we remain naive about the global spaces that have opened up in the past several decades.[83]

The consolidation phase has had to negotiate its way by, among other things, revisiting diaspora's two definitive blocks (dispersion from a homeland and ethnic/religious identities) as set in the initial prototypical phase and add yet another. While maintaining that in modern day diaspora the element of dispersion generally across state borders is essential, the impetus for such dispersion need not be strictly traumatic but may include voluntary migration as well. Brubaker notes that this criterion may be broadly interpreted 'so that dispersions *within* state borders may suffice.'[84] While a clearly defined sense of home/homeland remains essential to understanding diaspora, that homeland need not necessarily be real but could include imagined or virtual homelands.[85] Brubaker points out the declining value of homeland orientation as a criterion for defining diaspora, using studies that have shown several examples of modern day diasporas that are not so much inclined to returning to a particular place but rather, to creating a culture in diverse locations.[86] To these two building blocks, in the consolidation phase a third is added; boundary

83 K. Tölölyan, 'Restoring the Logic of the Sedentary to Diaspora Studies' in L. Anteby-Yemeni, W. Berthomière and G. Sheffer, eds., *Les Diasporas: 2000 ans d'historie* (Rennes: Presse Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), 138–139.

84 R. Brubaker, 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora', 5.

85 R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 12.

86 R. Brubaker, 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora', 6.

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maintenance – a criterion 'involving the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis a host society (or societies).'[87] It is in this regard that Safran makes note of the common features on his list of examples of modern day diasporas include their respective 'experiences of expatriation, institution-building, cultural continuity, and refusal to relinquish their collective identities [which] have demarcated them from mere immigrants.'[88] Emerging from all this is an understanding that diaspora communities need not be strictly patterned against the model of biblical Jews which had clearly defined homeland and ethnic/religious boundaries. The experiences ensuing in host communities, especially where it concerns identity preservation have assumed a central position in understanding diaspora.

Having established that diaspora communities are not necessarily defined by nature, alternative explanations have to be sought. Dominic Pasura notes that 'transnational diasporas, just as other formations, are not natural entities but are made, unmade and remade.'[89] Martin Sökefeld discusses this criterion at length arguing that modern diaspora is a result of deliberate mobilisation:

> As identities become politically effective only when they are employed and endorsed by a certain number of people, we have to ask how these people are *mobilised* for such an identity, how they are made to accept and assume it. Rather than being regarded as something that from the outset provides continuity and fixed structures for social life, as in primordialist approaches, identity becomes an issue of movement and mobilisation.[90]

Even where people share the same homeland, their reasons for leaving vary and so do their statuses in the destination countries. Some may find that their interests are best served by severing homeland ties completely and assimilating into the host culture. For others, maintaining transnational contact with their roots is their lifeline and yet still for others, situations may require that they shift between positions as may become necessary. Dispersion and a homeland orientation are not enough definitive blocks anymore as diaspora communities are increasingly becoming a result of deliberate mobilisation.

87 R. Brubaker, 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora', 6.

88 W. Safran, 'The Jewish Diaspora', 36.

89 D. Pasura, *African Transnational Diasporas: Fractured Communities of Zimbabweans in Britain.* Migration Diasporas and Citizenship Series. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

90 M. Sökefeld, 'Mobilising in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora' in *Global Networks* Vol. 6 (3) (2006), 265–284, 266–7.

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5 Summary

In summary, the concept of diaspora has had a very long trajectory and, as things stand, will continue on its 'progression' to ends no one can predict with certainty. With a Greco genesis (arguably) in the ancient agricultural practice of scattering seeds, the term morphed to an expression of the horror and spiritual anguish of the dispersion associated with biblical Jews. When Christian and Islamic interests buttressed the narrative traditions of the Jews (the dominant religious traditions influencing thought forms in the Western world for more than two millennia), the established congruency guaranteed that the transition was completed. The increased population movement across political borders has seen various groups of people perceiving of their circumstances in diasporic terms. Some theoretical framework for understanding diaspora has become necessary. The young academic field of diaspora studies begins with an understanding that the key elements defining the Jewish diaspora are normative and have paradigmatic effect on all other experiences claiming the diaspora label. The term is opened up to allow application to other groups of people who felt that their experiences were similar to those of the biblical Jews (emic) or were considered by others as satisfying the Jewish paradigmatic model (etic). Social constructionist critiques of diaspora argued against the necessity of a real homeland in understanding diaspora, thus paving way for consideration of all sorts of human 'communities' including professional guilds, internet based virtual communities and so on. This development throws the developing theoretical framework into some kind of a crisis. Diaspora theorists have chosen the route of reconciling the polarised positions and find some way to a common understanding of diaspora. The result includes a toned down emphasis on the need for an identifiable homeland and an additional consideration of the need for group preservation. It seems the position now is that diaspora communities need not be perceived in real terms but as results of deliberate mobilisation.

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CHAPTER 5

Analogical and Cartographic Perspectives of Postexilic Jewish Diaspora: Locating the Community behind Esther

1 Introduction

In this chapter I intend to explore the implications of applying the diaspora theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 4 above to the book of Esther. It is my submission that in that interface, it is possible to develop the basis for a heuristic key that allows for a hermeneutic engagement with Esther (and with possible application to several other biblical texts) that is not only innovative but also arguably more viable than others that have been employed in Esther studies so far. Cognisant of the fact that the use of the term diaspora in academic discourse is a relatively new development, I have deemed it necessary to consider whether a third or second century Jewish community outside Eretz Israel is appropriately to be described as a diaspora. In order to augment cartographic evidence of the existence of Jewish communities outside the Persian province of Yehud and accentuate the diasporic profile of the community behind the book of Esther, I have elected to employ a modern day analogy. To this end, in this chapter I will do three things. First, I will offer a summary discussion of the principle of analogy, tracing it from its classical formulations in antiquity to its normative and pervasive usage in current epistemologies. Second, I will offer a brief analysis of the analogous community chosen for this study, that being the Zimbabwe 'diaspora' community resident in the United Kingdom. Third, I will then apply the insights of this study to the book of Esther according to the hypothesis of this project.

2 The Principle of Analogy[1]

The fact that analogical reasoning has become a common currency in academic discourse is indeed beyond question. It has recognisably permeated intellectual discourse for over two millennia, so that it might be thought that

1 A concise treatment of the same is available in T. K. Mapfeka 'Empire and Identity Secrecy: A Postcolonial Reflection on Esther 2:10' in J. Stiebert and M. Dube, eds., *The Bible, Centres and*

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this is one epistemological base the usage of which needs no justification or explanation. We draw knowledge and build expectations by induction on the basis of past occurrences and make sense of difficult-to-reach domains by paying attention to similar ones within our realm. Willard Van Orman Quine and Joseph Silbert Ullian use the example from an activity most people engage in on a daily basis:

> Why do we expect toothpaste to exude when we squeeze the tube? We could cite general principles about what happens to liquids or soft solids under pressure, but we are more likely to support our expectation in terms of our past experience with tubes and their squeezings. What happens in such simple activities is related to general principles only in ways which, for most of us, remain far in the background. Very far; for were toothpaste to fail to spurt forth on a given squeezing we would surely not want to rewrite our physics. We would consider such hypotheses as that the toothpaste in the tube had been used up, that it was blocked in its passage by some foreign object, or that it had hardened. We would explain a failure of our expectation in the least sweeping terms available, making the revision in our belief body as small as possible.[2]

To anticipate a spurt of toothpaste when one squeezes the tube is inductive knowledge based on the repeated occurrence of the same in the past. However, using the same image of spurting toothpaste, if one wanted to analyse a spurt and, for some reason missed it, a repeat spurt can be used. The second spurt becomes an analogy of the first and of course its efficacy is dependent on the similarity of conditions. This is a simple representation of analogical reasoning. It is in this regard that Aristotle stated:

> When we base the proof of a proposition of a number of similar cases, this is induction in dialectic, example in rhetoric; when it is shown that, certain propositions being true, a further and quite distinct proposition must also be true in consequence, whether invariably or usually, this is called syllogism in dialectic, enthymeme in rhetoric.[3]

Margins: Dialogues Between Postcolonial African and UK Biblical Scholars (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2018).

2 W. V. O. Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York, NY: McGraw Education, 1978), 50.

3 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Publications, 2009), 9.

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In this section I will offer a brief trace of the trajectory by which the principle of analogy has evolved over a very long time.

2.1 *Formulation in Classical Philosophy: Aristotle* (*c. 384 BCE–322 BCE*)

It is in the work of Aristotle that the basis for analogical reasoning finds its classical expression; providing the general framework for all later theories of the principle of analogy in all their variations. As Paul Bartha notes, it must be stressed though that although Aristotle used the term analogy (*analogia*) and made reference to analogical predication, he never mentioned in explicit terms analogical reasoning or analogical arguments, let alone analogy as a principle.[4] Aristotle recognised two major types of argument, namely; (i) the argument from example (*paradeigma*) and the argument from likeness (*homoiotes*), both of which developed to become central to all later variations of the analogical argument.[5] It is in his work entitled *Rhetoric* that Aristotle developed a complete philosophical theory for the argument from example (*paradeigma*) and the argument from likeness (*homoiotes*). With regards to *paradeigma*, Aristotle remarked: 'Every one who effects persuasion through proof does in fact use either enthymemes or examples: there is no other way.'[6] The consequent philosophical framework that emerged is best understood in terms of a special rhetorical syllogism (a three-part deductive argument) commonly employed in oratory presentations from antiquity and technically referred to as enthymeme. Bertrand Russell credits to Aristotle the formulation of syllogism, which 'remained for some two thousand years the only type of argument recognised by logicians.'[7] One trait common to all enthymemes is that at least one premise of the argument is not expressed in explicit terms but rather bases its strength upon usage of examples that arise from one or more similar cases to arrive at a general proposition, and then argue deductively to a particular inference. In other words, the fact that something has happened so often in the past warrants an inference that it will happen again in the future. In the toothpaste imagery above, the fact that each time a toothpaste tube was squeezed in the past toothpaste spurted out does not guarantee that it will always do the same, yet it would be very unreasonable to think it ever will not. I will add at this point that its occurrence in the future becomes analogous to its having occurred in the past. Bartha identifies four basic criteria for evaluation

4 P. Bartha, 'Analogy and Analogical Reasoning', The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2013 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/reasoning-analogy/>. Section 3.2, accessed on 6 August 2016.

5 P. Bartha, 'Analogy and Analogical Reasoning', Section 3.2.

6 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 9.

7 B. Russell, *Wisdom of the West* (London: Rathbone Books Limited, 1959), 85.

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of analogical reasoning to emerge out of its classical formulation in the work of Aristotle and these are:

> *The strength of an analogy depends upon the number of similarities.*
> *Similarity reduces to identical properties and relations.*
> *Good analogies derive from underlying common causes or general laws.*
> *A good analogical argument need not pre-suppose acquaintance with the underlying universal* (*generalization*).[8]

While these four points are subject to discussion, their general sense adequately captures the common thread running through almost all analogical arguments to this day; organising analysis of the argument form around overall similarity. As stated in the first point above, the closer the similarities between the domains placed in an analogous relationship the stronger the argument.

2.2 *Formulation in Medieval Theology: Thomas Aquinas* (*1225–1274*)

The aftermath of the first expression of the ontological argument for the existence of God by St Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century CE saw medieval theological discussions centring on how human language could effectively convey metaphysical (or divine) concepts. In its classical form, the ontological argument for the existence of God derived from use of reason alone. St Anselm in his work entitled *Proslogion* defined God as 'that than which nothing greater can be thought'.[9] From that definition, he reasoned that if God did not exist then it would be possible to conceive of a being that exists which, by virtue of its existence, would be greater than God. Of course this would be awkward and technically nonsensical since the agreed understanding of God was that [he] was a being of which 'nothing greater' was conceivable. To be the greatest, God *must* exist. In the medieval conceptualisation of God, he was a phenomenon whose existence was necessary to his being. One of the most cited weaknesses of the ontological argument was the absurdity of arguing for God's existence by way of predicates. The question then became how human terminology could be applied to a realm that is not human.

Thomas Aquinas, being evidently a keen follower of the philosophy of Aristotle, employed the Aristotelian framework of reasoning on analogy to explain how human language would work in relation to God. In this instance, consideration had to be made as to whether the word 'exist' (and a host of

8 P. Bartha, "Analogy and Analogical Reasoning", Section 3.2, italics are in the source.

9 Anselm of Canterbury, 'Prosologion' in J. Hopkins, trans., *A New Interpretive Translation of St Anselm's Monologion and Proslogion* (Minneapolis, MN: Banning Press, 1986), 93.

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other terms used in reference to God – just, love, knowledgeable, to name a few) meant the same when applied to God as they did in everyday usage. Along the similar lines as reasoned by St Anselm, Aquinas argued for a distinction between existing 'essentially' and existing 'by participation'. In his argument, God does *not* exist but rather *is* existence itself.[10] He does not love but rather, *is* love. God cannot be described as just, wise, and knowledgeable as he is justice, wisdom, and knowledge respectively. A predicate by definition is that part of a sentence or clause that states something about the subject. As an example, in the sentence: 'Tsaurayi is a good man', the subject 'Tsaurayi' can be replaced by the name of any other man deemed 'good'; goodness in this sense is not something limited only to Tsaurayi. Tsaurayi the man's relationship to 'good' is limited to his participation in whatever it is that is understood as 'goodness'. If Tsaurayi were not a 'good man', he would still remain the same person, as he does not need to be good in order to retain his identity and being. On the contrary, to say 'God is good' is a statement that belongs to a different paradigm. Contrary to the example relating to the man Tsaurayi where the man is connected to goodness only in so far as he participates in goodness, God does not have the liberty to be *not* good ever.

> All the words we use have a creaturely mode of signifying in that they imply time and composition, neither of which can pertain to God. When speaking of God, we must recognize this fact, and attempt to discount it. To say "God is good" is not to imply that God has a separable property, goodness, and that he has it in a temporally limited way. God is eternally identical to goodness itself. But even when we have discounted the creaturely mode of signifying, we are left with the fact that God's goodness is not like our goodness. This is where the analogy of attribution enters the picture.[11]

God and goodness are not related by God's participation in some independent notion of good but rather in the sense that God is essentially good; God cannot be conceived as 'not good' and goodness is inconceivable without God. When used in reference to God, terms such as exist, good, and knowledgeable are not predicates but something of the essence of God.

10 E. J. Ashworth, 'Medieval Theories of Analogy' available at http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/analogy-medieval/, 14 accessed on 6 August 2016.

11 E. J. Ashworth, 'Medieval Theories of Analogy', 15.

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Does the word exist carry different meanings when applied to the Creator from when it is applied to creation? It is in attempting to resolve this puzzle that Aquinas employed Aristotelian analogical reasoning.

> … they cannot be purely equivocal, for we could not then make intelligible claims about God. Nor can they be purely univocal, for God's manner of existence and his relationship to his properties are sufficiently different from ours that the words must be used in somewhat different senses. Hence, the words we use of God must be analogical, used in different but related senses. To be more precise, it seems that such words as 'good' and 'wise' must involve a relationship to one prior reality, and they must be predicated in a prior and a posterior sense, for these are the marks of analogical terms.[12]

Existing essentially is a phenomenon that is inaccessible to human intellect. To this end participatory existence serves an analogical function on the basis of the general law of causality, which states that every agent produces something *like* itself. On the basis of the humanity's *likeness* to God as codified in the ecclesiastical doctrine of *Imago Dei* (Genesis 1:26–27), Aquinas reasoned that humanity participated in the essence of God. In those instances, where humanity is just, loving, knowledgeable and so on it is being like God who is all those things essentially and, as such, provide the necessary analogy with which to gain a glimpse into the essence of God.

2.3 *Formulation in Post Enlightenment Historiographical Discourse: Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923)*

Ernst Troeltsch blossomed into his academic heights in the wake of post Enlightenment discussions in relation to the philosophy behind history. Apart from economic overhaul with high paced industrialisation and a turbulent political scene caused by Marxist ideologies gathering momentum, Troeltsch also witnessed revolutionary developments in the academic discourse of his time. Being the son of a medical doctor and encouraged to study and attend to enquiry with a scientific eye from an early age, his disposition in matters academic was already inclined towards the natural sciences. In an autobiographical essay meant to give some perspective on his works near the end of his life (dated just a year before his death), he described his home life in this very telling way:

12 E. J. Ashworth, 'Medieval Theories of Analogy', 15.

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> At home I was encouraged to investigate the natural sciences, since my father was a doctor who gladly would have made a medical practitioner of me also, and who pushed me at an early stage into scientific observation and collection. There were skeletons, anatomical compendia, electrical machines, books of plants, books about crystals, etc. Thus it came about that I learned from the beginning to view all problems in the history and philosophy of culture within the context of a scientific worldview, and sensed at the same time that the interpretation of both worlds was a burning theoretical and practical problem.[13]

Given the Church's waning grip on epistemology in the post Enlightenment period and coupled with this sort of induction into the academics, Troeltsch's views in the very wide range of his intellectual interests tended to readily cast away all that seemed not to make sense in scientific categorisation. Ironically though, it was in the field of theology that Troeltsch confesses to have found his intellectual quests meeting some degree of satisfaction. On entering university studies in 1884, he tells how all other fields proved inadequate and says: 'At that time, theology alone seemed to offer an approach both to metaphysics and to unusually exciting historical problems.'[14] His survey and consequent understanding of history led him to conclude that knowledge, including 'moral awareness,' is never a onetime event but evolves and adjusts to new discoveries. Different people at different points in time and space came to be aware of and hold as true different assertions.

To demonstrate this point I will refer to one classic tale by Henry Rider Haggard (1856–1923) entitled *King Solomon's Mines*[15] – a fictional story set somewhere in the jungle of southern Africa at the beginning of the colonial era. In one scene, the fictional narrator, Alan Quatermain and his company, representing the enlightened colonial Europe (a trio of nineteenth century English gentlemen), found themselves in the royal court of the still savage and bloodthirsty African monarch, King Twala. The moral superiority of the English company was supported by a comparatively advanced scientific knowledge. While King Twala and the Africans, still at the dawn of Iron Age technology, knew only of close combat forms of war and hunting by use of

13 E. Troeltsch, *Religion in History* (trans. by J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 365f. This book is a collection of essays written by Ernst Troeltsch at various points of his academic career and this is from one entitled "My Books" published in 1922 just a year before his death in which he was giving a brief autobiography.

14 E. Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, 366.

15 H. R. Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) originally published in 1885.

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spears (and arrows), their European visitors had already mastered advanced assault mechanisms in the gun, which for the Africans' comprehension was referred to as 'the magic tube', one that could cause considerable damage from a long distance. In another scene, the European visitors were already able to prefigure such natural occurrences as the moon eclipse to outwit their savage African hosts and save the life of an innocent girl just about to be killed and offered as a sacrifice to pagan gods. Until such time as these things were taught to the Africans, the 'truth' was that their European visitors were divine or celestial at the very least.

Overall the story has detail that while quite normal in Haggard's day, a modern reader would find very difficult to process. While King Twala offered one of his subjects for the demonstration of the power of 'the magic tube', his morally superior guests refused and insisted on using an ox instead, demonstrating that scientific advancement brought with it a heightened moral awareness. The story goes on to give details of how the unfortunate ox was shot from a distance falling to the ground after taking a bullet through its rib cage. Today with more than a hundred years benefit of scientific advancement compared to Haggard's world, the fate of the ox is already too ghastly to contemplate. The story speaks in glorified terms of the European explorers' escapades as hunters, killing elephants for ivory and African game for sport, quite acceptable pursuits just over a hundred years ago. With knowledge that has come to fore in the last century resulting in questionable attitudes of the colonialists on contact with Africans (and people in other places), the rising awareness in animal rights and breakthroughs made in scientific and historical studies, what truths informed Haggard's world when *King Solomon's Mines* was first published in 1885 have definitely changed. A teenager in the year 2018 will hardly find anything amusing, let alone historically plausible in such a story.

I have taken this long detour to demonstrate the basic tenet of Troeltsch's argument against the idea that truth is a result of some revelation and his premise for denying the very concept of absolute truth. In the worlds depicted in the tale above and in the relationship of the world in which the story was developed and today's world, moral positions taken and what is held as the truth have evidently evolved. For people to treat each other with respect across races and to consider cruelty to animals as something bad are not God-revealed truths from time immemorial but hard lessons drawn from the history of our experiences. When viewed this way, Troeltsch argued that it is not possible at any point in time to consider the "truths" held as absolute since new discoveries may render such truths obsolete. For instance, while the ecclesiastical ruling elite today can afford the time to hold animated debates about the ordination of women, clergy women taking the office of bishop and the place of

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homosexual members in the church, some years down the line when a new generation takes over church management these debates will only look frivolous at best.

Troeltsch's contribution to the field of hermeneutics came in the wake of pursuing his primary interest in history. His concern was not limited to producing history but rather to the manner of its production. Due to his interest in historiography more than history, he ended up drawn more to the realm of the philosophy of history where he states, 'Here we are concerned principally with three essential aspects: the habituation on principle to historical criticism; the importance of analogy; and the mutual interrelation of all historical developments.'[16] In this section of the paper I will attend to these three principles in some detail.

First, what Troeltsch put as 'the habituation on principle to historical criticism' can be expressed simply as the principle of cultural relativism. By this Troeltsch understood history to be a process of critical analysis, producing only provisional truths. The historical critical method causing a great deal of commotion during his time rendered authoritarian hold on truth unsustainable as it subjected tradition '… to analysis, correction, and transformation in a thousand ways, with the final result being never more than probably correct.'[17] His survey of the historical landscape led him to conclude that what might pass for fact in one generation or era may require further qualification later as new insights develop. The impact of such understanding to biblical narratives cannot be over-emphasised. Claiming truth as rendered by the biblical texts becomes risky, as these are too distant in terms of both time and space to those holding them so reverently. Put simply, Christian claims to absolute truths based on biblical or any other form of revelation cannot hold as times and cultures have evolved so much since the biblical authors put ink to paper (or papyri).

In the second place Troeltsch alluded to the importance of analogy, which, as a hermeneutic tool, is critical for this study. Put simply, the principle of analogy states that for everything that our reality today cannot allow, accounts of such as having happened in the past must be treated with suspicion. For example, if very few people in the world today live for up to a century, to say there was a Methuselah who lived thirty-one years short of a millennium renders the historicity of accounts concerning him not only improbable but totally out of the realm of history. The principle of analogy states that 'everything in the

16 E. Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, 13.

17 E. Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, 13.

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past must find an analogy in the present if it is to be accepted as plausible.'[18] Ancient texts, which have come down to us such as the Bible, require some form of deciphering before interpretation can take place. The content must make sense somehow. Troeltsch's major contribution to the hermeneutic enterprise, in my view, is by using the historical plane to rearticulate a paradigm by which texts, otherwise unreachable because of time and space, can now be read by way of identifying analogies in the present.

Third is the principle that Troeltsch expressed as one to do with 'the mutual interrelation of all historical developments' which demands that history must be perceived as a continuous flow of events related on a cause-and-effect basis. Failure on the part of the historian to see the interconnectedness does not amount to its non-existence. Troeltsch argued that if this concept is granted, then, '… there can be no change at any point without some preceding and consequent change elsewhere, so that all historical happening is knit together in a permanent relationship of correlation …'[19] That flow of events excludes the miraculous and all the 'facts' dogmatic reading would want us to embrace as part of history, 'The miracles of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are often assigned a label that sounds general and obscures their difference from the secular world.'[20] To be acceptable as part of human history such happenings must be subjected to and pass the test of scrutiny as is the case with all other events.

3 Analogical Approach in Reading Esther

As intimated in the introduction of this chapter above, analogical reasoning has developed to become the currency of modern academic discourse. In terms of the classical formulation by Aristotle more than two millennia ago, all claims to truth rest upon a bedrock of example (*paradeigma*) (of the same having happened already in the past and anticipated to happen again in the future) and likeness (*homoiotes*) (of such striking similarities between domains to allow for analogous treatment). As is the case with any philosophical framework, analogical reasoning has its flaws. However, the foregoing discussion has shown that employing analogical reasoning as a framework for this study provides a reasonable basis to test the key hypothesis of this project, that is, it is the phenomenon of diaspora that is central to reading the book of Esther.

18 J. L. Adams, "Introduction" in E. Troeltsch, *Religion in History* (trans. by J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 5.

19 E. Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, 14.

20 E. Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, 21.

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In this section I will offer an analysis of the two analogical domains with the view to show sufficient *homoiotes* such as would allow for the application of a diaspora reading to Esther.

3.1 *Analysing the Modern-Day Analogical Domain: the Zimbabwean 'Diaspora'*

The application of historical critical approaches to Esther studies has yielded critical insights in the overall understanding of the book. The centrality of Purim as a heuristic key in reading the book has become not only the leitmotif in Esther studies but also an unassailable fact. As summed up by Adele Berlin, the book's connection with Purim is *the* reason for its inclusion in the Hebrew Bible:

> If we did not have Purim, with the reading of *Megillat* Esther as its centrepiece, Esther would languish in obscurity. In fact, it seems likely that Esther was included in the Bible because of the celebration of Purim.[21]

In the same publication, Berlin offers a whole section on 'Esther as a Diaspora story',[22] which, despite its peculiar and overly 'secular' tone, sits well in the genre of diaspora stories of the Persian and Hellenistic periods.[23] However, like many other contributors in Esther studies, the diaspora element is only mentioned with peripheral (if any) value as a heuristic key. This thesis rides on the hypothesis that it is diaspora (not Purim) that is central to understanding the book of Esther. The trajectory of analogical reasoning discussed above (with particular reference to the detour I took looking at Haggard's tale) has shown that as humanity evolves and adapts to new epistemological frameworks, what is held as the truth changes considerably. As discussed in Chapter 4 above, a diaspora based theoretical framework is not only a new development but also still forming. The peripheral application of a diaspora theory in Esther studies is consistent with its location in the academic discourse, that is, it is only recently when it has suddenly burst onto the scene with such force.

The storyline of Esther is set in the fifth century Persian Empire with the possibility that the context of the story's coming into being (its author and the community behind it) can be located in the third or second century. With the diaspora theory admittedly such a recent development, it becomes imperative that some consideration is given to how a third or second century

21 A. Berlin, *Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), ix.

22 A. Berlin, *Esther*, xxxiv–xxxvi.

23 A. Berlin, *Esther*, xxxiv.

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Jewish community outside the Persian province of Yehud would have perceived itself and, consequently, the feasibility of applying diasporic categorisations to such a community. The proposal to use an analogy comes in the wake of the realisation that the community behind Esther is inaccessible to the modern researcher. In the imagery of Quine and Ullian, the community behind the book of Esther is like a lost spurt of toothpaste, which, if analysis is needed, then some replica has to be employed. To this end, I have chosen the Zimbabwean community in the United Kingdom to provide an analogy for the community behind Esther. This way I hope to have provided an antidote to the chimerical nature of the community behind Esther and also serving as an accessible launch pad for the diaspora reading of the book that I am proposing. I must admit and bracket my bias on the choice of my analogy, having been born a Zimbabwean and thus a part of the Zimbabwean community in the United Kingdom. In analysing data relating to my analogy, I have to admit to considerable experiential sentiments. For academic balance, I have chosen to rely on the ethnographic studies that have been carried out by especially Dominic Pasura and Joanna McGregor on the Zimbabwean community in the United Kingdom.

In the short history of the country since the attainment of independence in 1980, Zimbabwe witnessed a lot of movement of its citizens. The first wave of movement was racially motivated as white Zimbabweans felt insecure under a black majority government,[24] but this must be seen as the peak of a political crescendo going back to the 1970s when white Zimbabweans left the country 'running away from the war [and] military call-up …'[25] The second wave was caused by ethnic tensions between the Shona dominated government and the Ndebele 'exacerbated through state massacres'[26] and saw huge numbers of the Ndebele moving across borders for safety. While each of these groups could link their movement to traumatic experiences in their homeland, diaspora is not a term that was used in relation to their flight. All this changed in the late 1990s when 'the movement became more all-encompassing, with women prominent in the outflow thanks to the feminisation of opportunity in care and nursing.'[27] JoAnn McGregor notes of the United Kingdom's care industry: 'The care industry is a significant employer in Britain, and estimates of the numbers of care§workers range between 922,000 and 1.6 million,

24 J. McGregor, 'Abject Spaces, Transnational Calculations: Zimbabweans in Britain Navigating Work, Class and the Law' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33 (4) (2008), 466–482, 469.

25 D. Pasura, *African Transnational Diasporas*, 39.

26 J. McGregor, 'Abject Spaces, Transnational Calculations', 469.

27 J. McGregor, 'Abject Spaces, Transnational Calculations', 469.

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the overwhelming majority of whom are women.'[28] The root cause for the renewed wave of movement of the Zimbabwean population was a fast declining economy and a strong conviction that the only way to make ends meet would be by going out of the country and climbing up the economic ladder by way of remittances back home. Except for the few who would use political muscle to make it in an economy that could now be described as lying in shambles, the generality of the population started to look beyond national borders. As most of Zimbabwe's neighbouring countries had their own share of challenges, preferred destinations were strong economies beyond the region. On the basis of the colonial history that stretched back to more than a century, the United Kingdom topped the list of preferred international destinations. Those that could leave left and most of those that remained in the country did so because they could not leave:

> As the exodus gathered pace and households of all classes were forced to look beyond Zimbabwe's borders to make ends meet, there was a notable class dimension to movement beyond the Southern African region, as would-be emigrants were filtered by their capacity to command the economic capital necessary for the flight. The filtering became more pronounced over time, particularly from 2000 as flights ceased to be available in local currency, and as visa requirements imposed by Britain in 2002 further inflated the costs.[29]

The situation at the turn of the century was such that anyone who could leave the country would gladly do so. From 2002, airlines would not allow on board persons without prior permission for entry into the United Kingdom. To honestly state to the British High Commission consulate in Harare that one wanted to come to the United Kingdom to look for work would be a sure basis for entry denial. Apart from seeking asylum (which needed almost unattainable volumes of evidence and placed people in further peril in genuine cases), to enhance chances of acceptance, visa applicants needed to give such reasons as visiting, holidaymaking or study. In each case there was need to satisfy the authorities at the consulate that one had sufficient resources for their upkeep in the United Kingdom and that they had sufficient collateral investment in Zimbabwe to guarantee their return. It became a multidimensional situation in that on the one hand the socio-economic circumstances of the country

28 J. McGregor, '"Joining the BBC (British Bottom Cleaners)": Zimbabwean Migrants and the UK Care Industry' in *The Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33:5 (2007), 801–824, 804.

29 J. McGregor, 'Abject Spaces, Transnational Calculations', 469–470.

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could be described in terms of trauma yet on the other hand leaving remained a technical choice, however widely shared. What is of critical importance here is the fact that where the option to leave was taken, its consummation became wholly dependent on financial clout. The biggest number of those who made it out of the country to far off destinations like the United Kingdom were not necessarily those with the most compelling experiences but rather those who could afford the exorbitant expense associated with the flight. In the end, social stratification based on the socio-economic dynamics at play ensured that largely the 'elite' of the Zimbabwean society would make it into the UK.

The formation of an urban-based political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) around this time heightened political tensions with a lot of people claiming grievous harm or danger thereof on the basis of their political views. The rhetoric that emerged following this development on the part of the ruling party made it dangerous to show support for the new opposition party, which was referred to as 'enemies of the state'.[30] This is aptly summed up in JoAnn McGregor's notation: 'The political and economic crisis, which has been deepening since 2000, displaced opposition constituencies and internationalized resistance to Zimbabwe's ruling Zanu-PF government.'[31] To the growing outflow of professional and semi-skilled workers discussed above, there was now an added number of Zimbabweans who felt unsafe because of their known political standpoints. Dominic Pasura puts the estimate of Zimbabweans successfully leaving the country in excess of two million out of a population of thirteen million. By the year 2000, the situation could be said to have reached crisis proportions. It is around this time that the outflow of Zimbabwean population was referred to as a diaspora. The Shonarised term '*madiaspora*' (the people in diaspora) used to refer to those who succeeded in getting out of the country has become so common to a point where it does not require any explanation.

As the subtitle to his recent publication states, the outcome of Dominic Pasura's research points to the fact that the Zimbabwean community in the United Kingdom is characterised by a fractured nature and a plurality of identities. There are ethnic differences, some marred by hostilities going back many years. There are differences in skill-related, professional and academic qualifications with some claiming superiority over others. The systems of the host country create further dissections as others are given legal statuses while others are forced to live as undocumented immigrants since going back home

30 D. Pasura, *African Transnational Diasporas*, 42.

31 J. McGregor, 'Associational links with home among Zimbabweans in the UK: reflections on long-distance nationalisms' in *Global Networks* 9, 2 (2009), 185–208, 186.

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is not an option for them. Gender and age are factors of considerable influence in negotiating diasporic identities.[32] The only thing that seems common among these people is the fact that they share a memory of having had to leave a common homeland (Zimbabwe) and are now settled in the United Kingdom. They harbour very strong political views of their homeland. They relate to their hosts through the lenses of the long colonial relationship, one that can best be described in terms of love-and-hate. Long is the list of factors that shape interests and experiences such that talking of a single community may actually be a misnomer. Sökefeld's idea of mobilisation as discussed above is the only route by which some semblance of a sense of community can be fostered.

3.2 *Analysing the Ancient Domain: Cartographies of Postexilic Jewish Communities*

For the analogical argument to work, there is need to establish as far as it is possible, the nature of postexilic Jewish communities to serve as *paradeigma* and precursor examples of the twenty first century analogical community of the Zimbabwean 'diaspora' in the United Kingdom. By so doing, I intend to provide reasonable grounds for a *homoiotes* relationship between the two domains of the community behind Esther and the analogical community I have elected to employ for this study. In drawing some sort of a map of postexilic Jewish communities, I intend to demonstrate a few elements upon which *homoiotes* necessary for my argument is based; these include a plurality of identities associated with 'transnationalism' and the 'constructionist' nature of diaspora narratives. I am in agreement with Laurie E. Pearce in stating, with regards to postexilic Jewish communities:

> The activities and legacies of those who returned to Judah and those who remained in Babylonia can be revealed only in so far as the people (both as individuals and as groups) can be identified. For this reason, any comprehensive understanding of 'exile and return' depends in the first place on determining those mechanisms by which Judeans may be identified and in the second on assessing what those identifications reveal.[33]

The domain of interest, that is the community behind Esther, though not fully comprehensible as an object of academic enquiry to a modern reader, must

32 D. Pasura, *African Transnational Diasporas*, 50–68.

33 L. E. Pearce, 'Identifying Judeans and Judean Identity in the Babylonian Evidence' in J. Stökl and C. Waerzeggers, eds., *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Exile* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 7.

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at least be intelligible in order for an analogical argument based on 'likeness' to be possible.

The exile accounts are clear that the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, was taken to Babylon (2 Kings 25:7 and Jeremiah 52:11). While the following verses do not state the destination for the rest of the deported party, it has always been taken for granted that everyone was deported to Babylon. Subsequent narrative regarding exile has relentlessly maintained Babylon as a place of Jewish זעוה (horror) as discussed in Chapter 4 above: from images of a weeping company of Jewish deportees 'by the rivers of Babylon' (Psalms 137:1) and pronouncement of blessing for those who will cause untold suffering to Babylon on revenge for Israel (Psalms 137:8)[34] to New Testament apocalyptic images of the great city of Babylon fallen and lying in utter ruins (Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). The monolithic presentation of the biblical narrative on exile is that there was deportation at the hands of the Babylonians at the beginning of the sixth century. As יהוה would have it, a more benevolent Persian regime conquered the draconian Babylonians and took over governance of the region, paving the way for the return of all exiles.[35]

It is in this context that the information found in the nineteenth century excavations at Nippur, among others, a huge library of what are known as the Murašû archival documents[36] in this ancient city to the South East of modern day Iraq, is of vital importance in providing reasonable basis to imagine alternative narratives. Working through the archaeological data from Nippur, Hermann Hilprecht and Albert T. Clay remarked on the abundance 'of Jewish names known from the Old Testament, especially from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.'[37] There are several documents that have since been published on the Nippur excavations[38] from which an alternative picture regarding Jewish exilic settlements emerges. Nippur region thrived on a feudal economy where large Babylonian families derived income by leasing out portions of land in the rich alluvial plain with the rivers Tigris and Euphrates marking its borders.[39] The several Jewish names Hiprecht and Clay refer to are tenants leasing land

34 Here is an indication of the thinking behind the positive portrayal of Persia, with Cyrus the Great referred to in messianic terms (Isaiah 45:1).

35 I have already attended to the question of historical veracity (or rather lack thereof) of that narrative in Chapter 3 above.

36 L. E. Pearce, 'Identifying Judeans and Judean Identity in the Babylonian Evidence', 8.

37 H. Hilprecht and A. T. Clay, *Business Documents of Murashû Sons of Nippur Dated in the Reign of Artaxerxes I (464–424 BC)* (BE 9; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Department of Archaeology and Palaeontology, 1898), 27.

38 L. E. Pearce, 'Identifying Judeans and Judean Identity in the Babylonian Evidence', 8. See note 2.

39 H. Hilprecht and A. T. Clay, *Business Documents of Murashû Sons*, 26.

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in a setting around fifth century Nippur with a rural and agro-based economy[40] (a deduction Pearce makes in reference to the work of Michael Jursa) – a lot different from the urban environs of Babylon as the referred predominantly monolithic view the biblical narratives portray. Apart from providing evidence for the existence of Jewish communities outside the precincts of the city of Babylon, I must stress the importance of the dating of these documents to the reign of Artaxerxes (464–424 BC), which points to the continued existence of large Jewish communities outside the Persian province of Yehud well after highways were opened for their return.

There is evidence for the existence of Jewish communities beyond the Nippur region. Pearce makes reference to further evidence that has been found in three tablets of the Moussaieff collection with one clearly stating the town in which it was composed as Āl-Yāhūdu.[41] In a copy of the transliterated and translated tablet available in the work of Francis Johannès and André Lemaire, Āl-Yāhūdu is translated as 'Judahtown'.[42] There is also a more recent discussion of the text of this tablet by Wilfred G. Lambert.[43] Suppressed or merely excluded in the paradigm of 'exile to Babylon and subsequent return to Judah' in the dominant biblical narrative are stories of Judean communities such as the one in the Nippur region of Babylonia and that at Āl-Yāhūdu. While admitting to the painstaking nature of the exercise because of scant availability of cuneiform sources, Yigal Block explores the naming patterns within Judean communities before the discovery and subsequent publication of the Murašû documents and notes:

> In another instance, a group of individuals active mostly in Susa and probably belonging to families of royal officials (as suggested by names and protonymics of the type of *Beamtennamen* – names expressing a pious wish for the wellbeing of the king) displays the use of Yahwistic

40 M. Jursa, *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC: Economic Geography, Economic Mentalities, Agriculture, the Use of Money and the Problem of Economic Growth* (AOAT 377; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010).

41 L. E. Pearce, 'Identifying Judeans and Judean Identity in the Babylonian Evidence', 11.

42 F. Johannès and A. Lamaire, 'Trois tablettes cuneiforms à l'onomostique ouestsémitique' *Transeuphratène* 17 (1999): 17–34, 18, 33 (taken from L. E. Pearce, 'Identifying Judeans and Judean Identity in the Babylonian Evidence').

43 W. G. Lambert, 'A Document from a Community of Exiles in Babylonia', in *New Seals and Inscriptions, Hebrew, Idumean and Cuneiform* (HBM 8; ed. Meir Lubetski; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 201–205.

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> names even though the fathers of those individuals bore Babylonian theophoric names.[44]

With particular reference to Sippar, Block explains the presence of Babylonian names in what should have been Judean genealogical records as a matter of Judean merchants adopting foreign names out of necessity to allow commerce with 'conservatively minded upper strata of the native Babylonian society.'[45] Assimilation was rampant, in which case it would be unnecessary to stretch evidence searching for Hebrew roots for Mordecai and Esther as the Jewish main protagonists in the text of my primary focus. Despite the ongoing discussions on the value of Yahwistic names as identity markers,[46] however, it is not at all farfetched to conceive of an identifiable community of Jews in Susa even as late as the third or second century, well settled and with no plans to return to Eretz Israel. Two things are clear here, first that the experience of exile went way beyond the precincts of the city of Babylon and, second, that there were Jewish communities that, for whatever reason(s), elected to stay away from Eretz Israel well after the much publicised return.

Working with material coming from within the same region of Nippur, Ran Zadok offers an additional dimension worth consideration for this enterprise. The discussion above has not strayed far off the impression that the evident presence of Jewish communities outside the Eretz Israel is somewhat linked to the occasion of Babylonian conquest and subsequent deportations of early sixth century. Making reference to the work of Michael Jursa[47] and Neo/Late-Babylonian cuneiform material, Zadok discusses 'the presence of three West Semitic ethno-linguistic groups (Chaldeans, Arameans and Arabians) in the Nippur region'[48] from as far back as the middle of the eighth century. Block shares the same sentiment when he avers:

> It is possible that some bearers of Yahwistic names in Babylonia were descendants of the exiles from the northern kingdom of Israel, deported

44 Y. Bloch, 'Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile: Assimilation and Perseverance under Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Rule' in *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 2014; 1(2); 119–172, 119.

45 Y. Bloch, 'Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile', 119.

46 L. E. Pearce, 'Identifying Judeans and Judean Identity in the Babylonian Evidence', 29–32.

47 M. Jursa, *Neo-Babylonian Legal and Administrative Documents: Typology, Contents and Archives* (GMTR 1; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2005), 110–116.

48 R. Zadok, 'West Semitic Groups in the Nippur Region between c.750 and 330 B.C.E.' in J. Stökl and C. Waerzeggers, eds., *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Exile* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 94.

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> to Mesopotamia by the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BCE; some of the northern exiles or their descendants could have been settled in Babylonia or could have drifted there on their own, perhaps during the period of the decay of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the 630s–610s BCE …[49]

As already intimated, the sort of data used here is still subject to discussion as naming patterns are subject to all sorts of interpretations. However, the possibility of an Aramean populace as part of the West Semitic presence in the Nippur region, Sippar, Susa and presumably elsewhere in the region predating the exilic period suggests that the early sixth century deportations at the hands of the Babylonians cannot be the sole explanation of the existence of Jewish communities outside Eretz Israel in the exilic and subsequent periods.

It is my considered opinion that what is available so far is sufficient for mapping out the general patterns of Judean settlements for the most part of the first millennium BCE and to reasonably estimate the nature of such settlements. Indeed, there were several Judean communities scattered across the region that at some point became the Persian Empire. There are various reasons that necessitated movement from homeland with deportation as one among many. Other reasons included trade, employment and voluntary settlement following time in imperial service, to name a few. As reasons for leaving Eretz Israel differed from individual to individual and community to community, so did fortunes of the people. It is true, particularly for the elite, that exile translated to some downgrading of the standard of living they enjoyed in the homeland but the evidence available suggests that for some, living away from their homeland was a huge improvement as they posted huge successes as merchants or in the occupations they pursued. Life outside the land of Israel for the Judeans was characterised by a multiplicity of fortunes such that no one narrative would ever cover the entire range of experiences. The persistence of Yahwistic names is indicative of a shared memory of a homeland. With the two domains established reasonably firmly, I will now turn to draw some essential lines to establish *homoiotes* before applying the proposed diaspora theory within an analogical framework.

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Worth noting are two observations at this point regarding the disparity between the two domains. First, the narrative memory of departure in the case of the community behind Esther is one characterised by forced deportation

49 Y. Bloch, 'Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile', 123.

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at the hands of a powerful overlord. The situation in Zimbabwe is different in that there is no external force responsible for the migration. However, while the Zimbabwean migration is, by and large, 'voluntary', the push factors in the homeland are comparatively compelling. In the emerging narrative of the Zimbabwean diaspora, the circumstances in the homeland turned out to be such that staying was no longer a choice. While the agent of force has not been some external power like Babylon, the force of internal pressure has been enough to allow for some degree of *homoiotes* with that of the biblical Jews of the early sixth century in Aristotelian terms. In any case, with the biblical narrative of 'return' predating Esther, both communities are in a state where they remain outside their respective homelands because for some reason going back is not an appealing option. Second, there is also the challenge associated with employing the elected domain lies in the fact that even if some notion of community could be developed, the Zimbabwean diaspora in the United Kingdom has a very short history of less than sixty years. Based on the experience of biblical Jews, diaspora is a concept associated with a history spanning over centuries. It is from this backdrop that Pasura asks: 'at what point transient Zimbabwean migrants became diaspora.'[50] I can then acknowledge that apart from time and space, the two domains differ in significant ways. However, the same can be acknowledged, to say the least, of the Creator and the creation in the medieval theological usage as discussed above. The domains placed in an analogical relationship need not be exact copies.

4 Juxtaposing the Domains: *Homoiotes* Justifying the Analogy Model

Having acknowledged the differences between the two domains in this study, I have proceeded to employ the Zimbabwean diaspora in the United Kingdom as the analogical domain because, like the biblical Jews, the emerging diaspora narrative is not based on historically and intellectually verifiable facts but rather is characterised by emic application of the phenomenon. In both cases the jury is still out on the question of whether they are real diasporas yet they see themselves as such. On the whole, the differences notwithstanding, there seems to be sufficient commonality between the two domains to allow for analogical analysis. I will now turn to highlight some of the similarities especially in so far as they accentuate imaginations of diaspora.

50 D. Pasura, *African Transnational Diasporas*, 25.

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4.1 *Diaspora Narrative as a Construct of the Elite*

When the economic elite of the Zimbabwean community[51] arrived in the United Kingdom at the turn of the twenty-first century, many of their compatriots were already settled here from the several waves of migration going to as far back as the 1960s. While it is true that the larger percentage of the community of Zimbabweans now forming in the United Kingdom would explain the conditions of their departure in terms of victimhood and trauma, there are those, throughout the trajectory, who left voluntarily because the United Kingdom represented 'greener pastures'. This later group is often well documented (even naturalised as British citizens) and is characterised by a life of comfort very much comparable to that of British nationals. Depending on how long they have been in the United Kingdom and how comfortable they have become, their level of integration is so near perfect that, in their worldview, cultural orientation and linguistic expressions, they sound more British than Zimbabwean. While the period covered by the Zimbabwean diaspora is only about fifty years, the pattern emerging is pretty informative. While almost anyone in the United Kingdom who can claim Zimbabwe as their homeland identifies themselves as part of the Zimbabwe diaspora, that label has only come into being in respect of the conditions of the elite group to leave Zimbabwe within the last twenty years. When the Zimbabwean economy was functional, the elite (drawing from middle and upper classes of society) lived a luxurious life style generally – most worked normal 08:00–17:00 shifts Monday to Friday or less, earned enough to employ household help in live-in maids and gardeners, could afford most trappings of 'a good life'. The economic meltdown of the late 1990s and the consequent political instability created a situation of hopelessness. Unlike the Jewish community of the early sixth century BCE whose deportation was forced by a foreign overlord, the Zimbabwean elite was pushed by internal socio-political and economic factors. When looked at this way, being able to leave Zimbabwe has been a cause for celebration. At a personal level considering the continued deterioration of the push factors, not only have I sensed colleagues looking at my living away from home as something of a fortune, I have also felt the same.

However, the emerging narrative of the Zimbabwe diaspora is constructed around that of the Jewish diaspora, adopting for ourselves the lyrics of the Psalmist singing: 'By the rivers of the United Kingdom, there we wept, when we remembered Harare (or some Zimbabwean city or location wherein we grew up)' (adaptation of Psalms 137:1). With migration as one of the top items on

51 As discussed above, elites in that they were able to command the resources to make it this far despite acute competition and prohibitive costs.

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our hosts' political agenda, the United Kingdom will gladly see our backs. For a Zimbabwean who was a domestic worker, unemployed or who came from the lower ranks of the Zimbabwean society – a successful asylum seeker, fortunate to have been sponsored by some relative or on scholarship – this is the life. Those that are weeping by the rivers of the United Kingdom are the ones who have been forced to downgrade their standards of life. In addition to losing the trappings of 'good life' as discussed above, they are having to endure long hours of work, severe deskilling and having to suffer the psychological effects of settling for less than they are worth. In this class' view, indeed, the United Kingdom is 'requiring of us a song' when our qualifications are not recognised and we are relegated to doing menial tasks. Admittedly, our earnings are way more valuable when compared to our compatriots in the homeland but they are coming at the expense of our dignity and sense of respect. The joy at the fortune of having made it to the United Kingdom is cancelled by the lived experience of especially this class of the Zimbabwean community. For this group, life in the United Kingdom is characterised by the sort of זעוה comparable to that in the memory of biblical Jews in respect of the Babylonian exile. It is this group that readily sees their condition as diasporic in the true sense of the word. The consequent narrative and rhetoric of the entire Zimbabwean community being a diaspora is a construct of this particular class now finding wholesome application to every Zimbabwean in the United Kingdom without regards to when, how or why they left their homeland in the first place.

Similarly, without regards to when, how and why every Judean leaving outside the land of Israel by the second century BCE came to be in their respective stations, the label of Jewish diaspora became a shared label for all those who could claim Eretz Israel as their homeland. I have already made reference to the early sixth century Babylonian conquest and subsequent deportations narratives (2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52), which, while unclear in terms of destination of deportees, make it clear that the exercise did not affect the entire population but only the upper class. At the end of it all, not only do we have a numerically significant portion of the Jewish population remaining at home but also a large portion to have left much earlier. In the discussed material suggesting a huge presence of Jewish communities beyond the city of Babylon there is nothing to preclude the possibility of voluntary migration in the postexilic era. The evidence of thriving Jewish communities at Nippur, Āl-Yāhūdu, Sippar, Susa and other places, predating the early sixth century deportations by the Babylonians, shows that no one narrative can cover the experience of every Jew living outside Eretz Israel. When understood this way, the phenomenon of diaspora is central to understanding Esther given the extent

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to which the author of the story goes in trying to connect the narrative with the deportation of early sixth century (Esther 2:6).

4.2 *Diaspora Narrative as a Critique of Homeland Politics*

On 19 April 2016, a day after the thirty-sixth commemoration of Zimbabwe's independence from colonial rule, a hitherto unknown cleric, Evan Mawarire, posted a video on his Facebook page. In this video, Mawarire shared his personal frustration at the continued declining performance of the government and state of Zimbabwe which, in his words: 'now stand in the way of my dreams.'[52] In the video, Mawarire is seen holding the Zimbabwean national flag lamenting how the general population of Zimbabwe has been robbed of the wealth symbolised by the colours of the national flag. Mawarire implores his fellow citizens to rise up from their state of indifference to the ills of bad governance and hold the establishment accountable for failed promises, its lacklustre approach in dealing with rampant corruption and widespread poverty. The video went viral, reaching more than a million views, likes and shares in a matter of hours as Zimbabweans all over the world found resonance in the young pastor's words. A hash tag movement dubbed #thisflag has since emerged from that video taking social media by storm and with occasional spilling onto the streets of various towns in Zimbabwe. The situation has grown to such proportions as to force the government into repressive action including arresting Mawarire on charges of 'subverting a constitutionally elected government' and the state President making a public statement asking Mawarire and those who share his views to leave Zimbabwe and seek refuge in countries sympathetic to their views.[53] On being set free of the charges on a technical basis, Mawarire left Zimbabwe for South Africa where he is based at the time of writing this piece.

The scenario I have described in the foregoing paragraph places the limelight on the role of diaspora and its attitude to homeland politics. It is true that despite its challenges in other sectors, Zimbabwe has a well-developed cyber network system that allows for internet connectivity even in some of the most remote areas of the country. That an internet based campaign like **#thisflag** would generate sufficient interest within the borders of Zimbabwe is very possible. However, going by the experience of Mawarire as narrated above, it seems like the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression

52 Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LubMilbHiPg&sns=em accessed on 31 July 2016.

53 Available at https://youtu.be/MZM_PGLjS4Q accessed on 31 July 2016.

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does not translate to freedom 'after' expression. The current government seems to have become notorious for its alleged excessive repressive reactions to dissident voices. The kind of anger expressed on the online platforms related to the campaign Mawarire started point to a huge influence of the Zimbabwean diaspora – people who not only have even easier access to internet but also are safe from the long repressive hand of the homeland government. For instance, the heckling of a top government official, as was the experience of Zimbabwe's Minister of Finance in London in July 2016[54] would not be even imaginable on Zimbabwean soil. One thing that stands out is the generality of a negative perception of homeland government. In the field research carried out by Pasura amongst the Zimbabwean diaspora community in the United Kingdom, he noted that there is widespread tendency to place blame for their own זעוה (horror) on the shortcomings of homeland politics and the common rhetoric in diasporic space is very much close to homeland opposition politics. For instance, reflections around state sponsored celebrations for independence from colonial rule, as in the case of Mawarire discussed above, are characterised by melancholic sentiments with one of Pasura's correspondents asking: 'Independence for what, there is no independence.'[55] For reasons that include bitterness arising out of the loss of certain privileges enjoyed in the homeland, safety provided by being so far away from the hub of the repressive homeland hegemony, exposure to alternative forms of governance and participation in a political culture that encourages citizen participation; diasporic space becomes one area where homeland hegemonic narratives are openly challenged and alternatives developed.

The traditions in Ezra-Nehemiah are imbued with the dialectical tensions between the postexilic returnees and those that had remained in the land. In Chapter 1 above, I made reference to the work of Elsie Stern who argued against the prevalent view that Esther is a product of diaspora but should be 'read as a Judean text that is critical of strategies of Diaspora living that are not oriented towards Jerusalem and grounded in particularist practices.'[56] While I have argued against Stern's theory, it provides for an understanding of the tension between homeland and diasporic communities. I have already alluded to the fact that the genealogical material in Esther 2:5 is not only awkward and fictitious but also constructed to convey a message. If the intention of the author of Esther was to provide an impressive background for the hero and heroine

54 Available at https://youtu.be/lceJAw6iSck accessed on 31 July 2016.

55 D. Pasura, *African Transnational Diasporas*, 53.

56 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora' in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (1) (2010), 25–53, 26.

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of the story, then the convention discernible in most other post monarchical genealogies for other Jewish heroes would have been applied here; through the Davidic line to the eponymous patriarchal figures. Instead the name Jair is used, a patriarch whose legacy is associated with the volatile and troublesome Gilead. Kish and Shimei are names linked to a monarchical line opposed to David and the predominant view of perpetual privilege of David and his progeny as articulated in the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7). The preponderance of monarchical terminology, the clear lack of interest in the centrality of Jewish hegemonic institutions (the temple, the city of David [Jerusalem], Mount Zion), the subversion of biblical Israel's monarchical narrative centred on David and the caricature of human monarchy in general are factors that point to an author who is doing more than mere provision of an aetiology for Purim. These factors suggest an interest in providing an alternative political narrative; one that is only typical in diasporic space for reasons already mentioned above.

4.3 *Diaspora Narrative as a Preserver of Peoplehood*

Closely related to the foregoing, it is commonplace for homeland authorities to disenfranchise the diaspora. In the case of Zimbabwe particularly, participation in the national political space in such fundamental processes like presidential, parliamentary and local government election, has residency as a basic requirement. This means that all Zimbabweans living outside homeland boundaries are excluded. I have already alluded to the fact that the Zimbabwean diasporic narrative is emerging around what could pass as its elite, the sort of people who harbour a feeling that in all that matters, they are more Zimbabwean (if ever there is anything like that) than their compatriots who have remained 'stuck' within homeland borders. For instance, a Zimbabwean internet blogger, Dr Noah Manyika, intimates of an initiative by diaspora based Zimbabwean intellectuals offering a blueprint to turn around the fortunes of the beleaguered country which the political authorities in the homeland ignored because they had no trust in the authors.[57] The resultant dynamic of the Zimbabwean political space is characterised by tension; with citizens in diaspora pushing for participation and the political authorities on the ground resisting any such efforts. For their part, those in diaspora are expected to prove somehow that they have the interests of Zimbabwe at heart. With the rhetoric of the Zimbabwean government pursuant to that ideal, the community in the United Kingdom

57 N. Manyika, 'Change cant [sic] Happen Without President Robert Mugabe Retiring and Everyone Owning the Struggle' available at https://www.facebook.com/cathybuckleafricantears/posts/845221035577679 accessed on 2 August 2016.

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is characterised by initiatives aimed at maintaining an idealised notion of Zimbabwean identity. There is a general realisation that lonely voices will easily be drowned in the arrogance of homeland authorities and several initiatives are underway not only to prove 'Zimbabweanness' but also to mobilise the entire diaspora into that enterprise. There is a remarkable insistence on cultural practices identified as Zimbabwean with deviance castigated in the strongest of terms. There seems to be some sort of a psychological reward or sanction system to influence continued identification with the homeland in matters of language, dress, etiquette, food and music. One correspondent in Pasura's ethnographic study remarked:

> The surprising thing is that when I was in Zimbabwe I never used to listen to Zimbabwean music but when I came here I found myself being drawn towards that kind of music, probably because I am homesick and listening to the music makes me think of home and be close to it.[58]

While the correspondent attributes his sudden affinity to Zimbabwean music to nostalgia, one cannot ignore the force of the undercurrent to identify with the Zimbabwean community. In some sense, the efforts to being recognised and accepted as Zimbabweans are so pronounced that the diaspora is becoming more Zimbabwean than their compatriots at home.[59] Underpinning the whole process is a deliberate effort to seek buy-in of all those in diaspora, amounting to a mobilisation process of sorts. Pasura found out that there is a significant number of people claiming Zimbabwean diaspora membership who, at the same time, hold British and/or other southern African nationalities.[60] At the end of it all, the question of who really is part of the Zimbabwean diaspora remains open. Whatever else it is, the Zimbabwean diaspora community in the United Kingdom is a socially constructed entity; the result of deliberate mobilisation with the view to preserve an idealised sense of 'Zimbabweanness'. It is done with the hope that it will strengthen a sense of belonging and provide for negotiating power to participate in homeland socio-political space.

If Esther's plot and narrative reflects the concerns of the community behind it (which is more than likely) then there are striking similarities that can be drawn. When Mordecai is first introduced the first detail given to the reader is

58 D. Pasura, *African Transnational Diasporas*, 51–52.

59 As has been documented of many migrant communities in the recent past, as homeland markers of identity change, migrant communities remain stuck in the times when they left. On return, migrants are often appalled at how their compatriots have turned into what they have been trying to resist.

60 D. Pasura, *African Transnational Diasporas*, 53.

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איש יהודי היה בשושן literally 'a man a Jew was in Susa' (Esther 2:5). Before any detail of the man is given, not even his name, we are told he is a Jew. If that is not telling in some way, then the usage of the word יהודי and its cognates throughout the story is arguably compelling. The word appears about eighty-five times in the Hebrew Bible and almost sixty of those appearances are in the book of Esther. In a discussion against the tendency to read the word as merely ethnic (without religious implications), Anne-Mareike Wetter, whose article I discussed in Chapter 1 above, states that the translation one prefers for the term is central to understanding the book as whole.[61] I have already noted the complications associated with the name Mordecai's closeness to that of Marduk, the patron god of Babylon. As I have already discussed above, Berlin argues: 'But Marduka, although it derives from the name of the god Marduk, appears to have been a common name, and there is no reason to press a direct connection with deities'.[62] I have already made reference to the common practice amongst the Jews outside Eretz Israel to take up Babylonian names in order to enhance trade, which is why the clearly Jewish names in the genealogy of Mordecai are of paramount importance. In this short tale, the author refers to 'Mordecai the Jew' more than ten times.[63] Like in the case of the analogical domain discussed above, the (over) emphasis of Jewishness points to a community that is conscious of the fact that its claim to that ethnicity faces challenges and is a matter to be proven rather than assumed.

The conversation between Mordecai and Esther in the first fourteen verses of Esther 4 offers a glimpse into the plurality of interests that characterised the community. On learning of Haman's plan to annihilate the Jews, Mordecai reacts in the typical way of self-abandonment; publicly expressing his anguish: 'Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry' (Esther 4:1). In the third verse, the author states that this was the standard reaction by the Jews in the provinces, as the decree detailing their fate became public knowledge. The narrative chronology has Esther תתחלחל (in distress) on hearing of her cousin's conduct by the gate of the palace before she knew of the decree and its contents. When she finally got to know of the decree, Esther reacted in a manner calculated at self-preservation; she could not go to the king (her husband) with this matter because that would have put her own life in danger since it was the custom that approaching the king without his summon was an offence punishable

61 A. Wetter, 'How Jewish is Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish? Tracing Ethnic and Religious Identity in a Diaspora Narrative,' in *ZAW* 123. 596–603, 596.

62 A. Berlin, *Esther*, 24.

63 A. Wetter, 'How Jewish is Esther?', 598.

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by death (Esther 4:11). While Esther may have had sympathies for the Jews affected by the provision of the decree, she clearly did not see it as any of her business going by her initial reaction. She could easily have watched from the security of her status and location as the horrible drama unfolded. It took what reads like a threat to push her into action: 'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this' (4:13–14). It would seem that if it were not for Mordecai's highhanded mobilisation tactics, Esther seemed well settled as the *malkah* of Persia and was unlikely to identify with her compatriots. The mobilisation drive continued to include people who were clearly not part of the Jewish community; 'Furthermore, many of the peoples of the country professed to be Jews, because the fear (awe) of the Jews had fallen upon them' (Esther 8:17b).

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I have worked from the hypothesis that the plot and narrative of the story of Esther reflects the concerns and reality of the community of the author and his audience. That is not at all novel. In a publication as early as 1878, Julius Welhausen remarked with regards to the patriarchal narratives:

> It is true, we attain to no historical knowledge of the patriarchs, but only of the time when the stories about them arose in the Israelite people; this later age is here unconsciously projected, in its inner and its outward features, into hoar antiquity, and is reflected there like a glorified mirage.[64]

Of course, effort would have been made to tell the tale in such a way as would make sense against the generally accepted paradigm of truth. I have placed a great deal of emphasis on understanding the community producing the text in order to read it. The chosen method has included an element of analogical reasoning, using the modern day Zimbabwean community in the United Kingdom as the analogical domain for the community behind Esther. Admittedly, the two domains are far removed from each other in terms of time and space. I have proceeded on the understanding that the two need not be exact replicas, as the philosophical background of analogical reasoning only requires

64 J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* trans. J. Sutherland Black and A. Menzies (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885), 318–319.

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proof of sufficient *homoiotes* to work. I leave this section having drawn enough lines of similarities to allow for the application of the diaspora theory in reading Esther.

5 Application of a Diaspora Theoretical Framework: Special Focus on Esther 2:5–6

The narrative development concerning the decision by Haman to kill *all* Jews in the Persian Empire in response to Mordecai's refusal to pay obeisance to his elevated status in the structures of the administration of the Persian Empire is as puzzling as it is insignificant (Esther 3:6). It is puzzling in that it has no reasonable justification; there is no indication that *the* 'treasonous' act of denying Haman recognition of his greatness was a practice common to all Jews. It is insignificant in that it reads like one of those seemingly random occurrences in the development of the story aimed at developing the author's intended storyline; it is that sort of detail which would not change much of the story whether it happened in that exact manner or not. The same is true of the information provided regarding the casting of lots to determine the day the Jews would be killed: 'In the first month, that is, the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar' (Esther 3:7). I have already referred to Helen Jacobus who has suggested explaining this rather absurd detail and, by extension, the whole book using calendar related divination and magic practices in the world of the ancient Near East.[65] I concur with Jacobus in that here we have reference to a practice that made sense in the world of the author and his audience but lost to a modern reader.[66] However, the initial reference to *Pur* in Esther 3 does not give reason to place any significance on the detail or that on the basis of this having happened a festival would be instituted. Institution of Purim takes place in Esther 9. I have also referred to David J. A. Clines who argued for a cut-off point of the story at Esther 8:17, with chapters 9 and 10 as only later additions.[67] Even when protests to Clines' suggestion here are taken into account, that the

65 H. Jacobus, 'Calendars in the Book of Esther: Purim, Festivals, Cosmology' in H. Jacobus, A. K. De Hemmer Gudme, and P. Guillaume, eds., *Studies in Magic and Divination in the Biblical World* (Danvers, MA: Gorgias Press, 2013).

66 The same can be said of the 'sandal ritual' of Ruth 4:7.

67 Of course it is a position that has been challenged. Jacobus is of the opinion that Esther 9 offers the component needed to complete the circle underpinning her theory on calendar, magic and divination. Stephanie Dalley reads Esther 9 and 10 as the climax of

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casting of *Pur* in Esther 3 and the institution of the Purim festival in Esther 9 constitute the central key to reading the book, is a position that can be maintained only precariously. It is my submission that the diaspora element in the genealogical material of Esther 2:5–6 offers a more viable alternative. I will now use the diaspora theory developed in Chapter 4 above and insights gleaned in analysing the two domains discussed in the foregoing sections to test my hypothesis.

In the two verses selected for special focus and discussed in Chapter 2 above, that is Esther 2:5–6, the author of Esther manages to do three things that are important for understanding the whole book. First, it seems like he is warning the reader not to be misled by the foreign sounding name as Mordecai's Jewishness is stated as a matter of fact. Later on in Esther 2:7 when Esther is introduced, the reader is provided with her Hebrew name, Hadassah, making the Jewish connection of the protagonists even more explicit. The author seems determined to show that despite evidence to the contrary, the duo of Mordecai and Esther are bona fide Jews. Second, by way of genealogy in Esther 2:6, the Jewish protagonists of the story are introduced to the reader in a way that affirms their Jewishness. Again as already pointed out above, foreign name bearing Jews were not unusual but as is the case here, their parents would have Jewish names. Third, anticipating the reader to wonder about the manner of business that would bring a Judean this far east to the winter residence of the royal court of the Persian Empire, the author of Esther makes a quick connection with what has been understood as the prototypical diaspora in modern discourse. It is the awkwardness of these details that I will focus on as I seek to demonstrate the efficacy of a diaspora reading of the whole story.

5.1 *Esther and Prototypical Diaspora*

The author of the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament begins by offering the genealogy of Jesus of Nazareth with the following sketch as preamble: 'An account of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham' (Matthew 1:1). There are at least two ways to read this statement: (i) Jesus the Messiah was the son of David, the David who was the son of Abraham or (ii) Jesus the Messiah was son to both David and Abraham. Neither of the two is a correct representation of the ensuing literary narrative detail. If any earthly figure must be mentioned as the father of Jesus then it should be Joseph of Nazareth, the carpenter. That ambiguity notwithstanding, the author of the Gospel picked up two of the most towering figures of the Jewish faith narrative

the battle of the gods in her theory that the story of Esther a Judaic adaptation of Assyrian eighth century mythology.

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of his time and in the detailed genealogy to follow both David and Abraham are placed in their respective positions on the line of ancestry. The author of the Gospel of Matthew employed details already known to his audience that the Messiah would come from the loins of David and would be a descendant of Abraham.[68] While stating that Jesus was the son of David and that Jesus and David were sons of Abraham may be a matter of misrepresentation of narrative facts, the use of such genealogical connections was widely held (Matthew 9:27; 12:23; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 22:42; Mark 10:47, 48; 12:35; Luke 1:32; 18:38, 39). For the author of the gospel of Matthew to refer to Jesus as the son of David or Abraham may be incorrect but it is a well-known and acceptable cliché.

It is from this backdrop that Esther 2:5–6 reads rather awkwardly. While the traditions giving rise to the story could have originated in eighth century Assyrian mythology (Stephanie Dalley), or are traceable to concerns regarding calendar with its role in magic and divination practices in the world of the ancient Near East (Helen Jacobus), that in its final form the story of Esther is a Jewish story cannot be disputed. It is the wanton flouting of convention in the genealogical material given which begs the question – the convention being that genealogies were employed primarily to show 'the legitimacy of an individual in his office or provide an individual of rank with connections to a worthy family or individual of the past.'[69] Since the period of Enlightenment, historical veracity of biblical genealogies has ceased to be the issue. Where an individual is introduced, attempts are made to connect them to someone of significance in the past as in the case with the genealogy of Jesus discussed above.

Mordecai is introduced thus: 'Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish a Benjaminite' (Esther 2:5). Kish, Shimei and Jair mentioned here could have been real persons known to the author and his audience or fictitious characters developed for Mordecai, a figure of fiction as well. Otherwise a gaze across the literary terrain of the biblical narrative will show these names as associated with some interesting figures to have graced the narrative history of biblical Israel. Apart from here in Esther 2:5, the name Jair is mentioned ten more times in the Hebrew Bible (Numbers 32:41; Deuteronomy 3:14; Joshua 13:30; Judges 10:3, 4, 5; 1 Kings 4:13; 1 Chronicles 2:22, 23; 20:5). The majority of these references have

68 R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

69 M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 78.

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to do with Jair being the son of Manasseh and/or the conqueror and occupier of the region of Gilead in the Transjordan region in the settlement/conquest traditions. The problem of making sense of the settlement traditions in the book of Judges aside, Gilead is at the centre of a complicated matrix involving the eponymous connectedness of the tribes of Benjamin, Manasseh and Ephraim. Jair is a name associated with the polemical tensions defining the post settlement confederation of biblical Israel. The name Shimei is associated by a number of personages in the biblical narratives, appearing forty-six times in the Hebrew Bible. However, the most memorable of these figures and readily linked to the one in Esther 2:5 in that he too was of the tribe of Benjamin,[70] is Shimei the son of Gera who is remembered as vehemently opposed to the rule of David (2 Samuel 16:5, 7, 13; 19:16, 18, 21, 23; 1 Kings 2:8, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44). Association of the name Shimei with negativity and counter narrative cannot be missed. Similarly, the name Kish is associated with several characters in the Hebrew Bible and, again like Shimei, there is one closely related to Esther 2:5 on account of being a Benjaminite, that is Kish the father of Saul (1 Samuel 9:1, 3; 10:11, 21; 14:51; 21:14; 1 Chronicles 8:33; 9:39, 12:1; 26:28). To say that the reign of Saul to which the name Kish is closely associated was marred in controversy would be a matter of understating the narrative facts. The awkwardness of Esther 2:5 lies in that all three names populating the genealogy of Mordecai are not only of minnow status but are also associated with negative portrayal, thus subverting the known purpose of genealogies. It is my considered opinion that such cannot be mere coincidence. The Ezra-Nehemiah traditions give the impression that postexilic reconfiguration of the community of biblical Israel included working with records of descent and were claims to the Davidic royal line, the onus for proof became particularly acute. Apart from diaspora communities' tendency to be associated with politics of protest as discussed above, the community behind Esther would find it difficult to claim to be a part of the prototypical diaspora narrative by using the Davidic line, details of which would have been securely guarded. The author of the book of Esther and the community behind it are concerned with establishing a link with prototypical Diaspora.

5.2 *Esther and Expanded Diaspora*

The genealogical material of the Jewish hero and heroine provided (Esther 2:5) connects Mordecai and Esther to the geo-political centre of biblical Israel. However, as many scholars have noted, Eretz Israel, the city of

70 In Chapter 2 above I made reference to one rabbinic tradition's ready association of these two, see B. Grossfeld, trans., *The First Targum to Esther: According to the MS Paris Hebrew 110 of the Bibliotheque Nationale* (New York, NY: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1983), 45.

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Jerusalem, Mount Zion or the temple are features that seem to have no significance at all as the story develops. As noted above in relation to the use of the term הודי, it seems the preoccupation of the author is to claim a portion for the community around Susa in what could be identified as the community of biblical Israel and a stake in the prototypical diaspora. I concur with Stern's notation that:

> As a theoretical construct, Diaspora is an inherently relational term. Diasporas only exist in relation to a center and the term is only invoked by cultures who understand their geographical locations to be alienated from an ancestral or rightful homeland or center.[71]

The disparity between an overt interest in claiming Jewish identity and a complete disregard of the geographical centre associated with Jews presupposes a community the Jewishness of which requires further scrutiny. I have already made reference to the inclusion of persons of non-Jewish stock in the ranks of the community behind (Esther 8:17b), suggesting that it is likely to have been a community the definitive features of which point to a non-Jewish community in the first place. In the emerging theoretical framework on diaspora, the second phase of expanded diaspora is concerned with communities retaining their identities but getting recognition as genuine diasporas on the basis of the likeness of their respective experiences to that of biblical Jews. I have noted that in some instances like cyber based diasporas, the likeness is so weak to render the application of the term diaspora controversial at the very least. The community behind Esther, which I see as the one reflected in the story, if not a part of the prototypical diaspora discussed above, it is one, once mobilised, assumed emic application of diaspora and sought to be identified as such.

5.3 *Esther and Social Constructionist Critiques of Diaspora*

It is rather curious that the Jewish community in the book of Esther is never clearly identified. Apart from the names mentioned in the genealogy of Mordecai (Esther 2:5), the reader meets not a single Jew in the story. I have already alluded to textual evidence of the fractured nature of the community and Mordecai's (at times heavy-handed) mobilisation initiatives. As everything else about this story, statements credited to characters must be understood as artistic creations of the author. However, if Haman's perception of the Jews in the plot can be taken to represent the general perception from outside the community then a few inferences can be made. In petitioning the king for the annihilation of the Jews, Haman expresses himself in the vaguest of ways:

71 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', 31.

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'There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction …' (Esther 3:8–9). Haman does not mention the Jews or any specific ethnic or religious group, but rather an oxymoron of a scattered community of insurgents to be found in 'all the provinces'. King Ahasuerus would be such an untrusting monarchy not to act on the intelligence gathered by his trusted vizier and purge the empire of potential troublemakers and get paid for it. Of course Haman knew that Mordecai was a Jew. However, the transition from one Jew to all Jews in the provinces seems a lot more problematic than from one disobedient colleague court official to all people in the provinces of the empire who shared Mordecai's view that not all decrees of the king should be followed to the letter. Given that at the time of the narrative development of Esther, Eretz Israel is the Persian province of Yehud and that the institution of the Second Temple and its structures are already operational, it is difficult to imagine how the Persian imperial hegemony would proceed to deal conclusively with a matter involving Jews in all the provinces without involving the community's known leadership at the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the third phase of the developing theoretical framework for studying diaspora concerned with social constructionist critiques of the phenomenon, diaspora communities are more likely imagined than real entities. In what I would argue to be not so long after the institutionalisation of Purim, it is referred to as 'the day of Mordecai' (2 Maccabees 15:36). The plausibility of the character of Mordecai lies in the fact that it has precedence in such figures as Joseph, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel – Jewish heroes who scaled great heights in foreign royal court. While each of them enriched the narrative of the community of biblical Jews, none would be allowed to assume the role of the leader of all Jews. The characters of Mordecai and Esther are arguably Jewish. It can be argued that on the grounds of ethnic synergies and affinities, unnamed Jewish compatriots would stand by him in his conflict with Haman. However, the community that gathered around Mordecai and Esther in their standing against Haman makes sense more as a social construct than a real ethnic entity.

6 Implications of a Reading Proceeding from a Theoretical Analysis of Diaspora

The association of the word 'diaspora' with the book of Esther from about the 1970s has been, for the most part, a natural progression in place of 'exile'. For

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most contributors to Esther studies, diaspora is a term that can be used without any effort at nuancing it from migration, exile or any of their cognates. As the term diaspora has proliferated in intellectual discourses in the last four or five decades as discussed in Chapter 4 above, so has its usage in published titles of articles and monographs on Esther and other postexilic portions of the Hebrew Bible. With particular reference to Esther, I concur with Stern's summation of the general tendency of scholars mentioning diaspora in relation to Esther:

> These prevalent assumptions about Esther's intended audience and authorship are grounded in the story's setting in the Diaspora, its fascination with the workings of the Persian bureaucracy that it portrays, and its total silence regarding the land of Israel and its national and cultic significance. In addition, the assumption that Esther is a Diaspora story also serves to contextualize the book's message and to explain its peculiarities.[72]

The assumption is that there was some genuinely identifiable Jewish community in the eastern diaspora within which the story of Esther, whatever its origins, was 'judaicised' to provide model reference for living in diaspora and provide the needed narrative for joining in as their host community was making merry in some feel-good pagan holiday. It is on the basis of such reading that Purim became closely tied to the book. A theory-based application frees scholarship from the lockdown of the imagination of a real Jewish community and the need to search in history for when attempts were some foreign overlord ever made attempts to annihilate all Jews.[73]

I have worked with the evidence available to show that from as far back in time as the eighth century, people of Jewish descent ventured outside Eretz Israel with varying levels of success and fortune. The occasion of the Babylonian conquest and consequent deportation targeted at the elite of the Jewish community is not an adequate explanation for the presence of all Jews outside Eretz Israel. The prototypical diaspora narrative must be understood as a product of a group of people whose memory of homeland was characterised by some sense of nostalgia. This is not to say it is not related to the truth, only that it is partial. Other narratives would emerge at some point as the individuals already scattered throughout the provinces start buying into

72 E. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', 25–26.

73 R. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948), 741–742.

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the story told by the elite. A diaspora-based theoretical approach allows for the re-imagination of narratives of other mobilised communities buying into the prototypical diaspora narrative. They need not prove anything. Working with consequent narratives would require that they are recognised as products of fractured identities brought together through processes of mobilisation. The resultant narrative is recognisable by, among other things, an overt negative habituation to homeland politics. As is the case of Esther, the mobilised community tells its story with the intention to be recognised as true יהודים and claim their stake in homeland political space.

7 Summary

While analogical reasoning has become the norm in modern-day epistemological frameworks, so important is its place in this study that I have found it necessary to begin this chapter by giving it some overt discussion. I have offered a summary trajectory of the phenomenon from its classical formulation in the work of Aristotle, looked at how it was employed in the medieval theological discussions especially in the work of Thomas Aquinas and have attended to its Post-Enlightenment expression in the work of Ernst Troeltsch. I have offered brief analyses of the two domains for use of analogical argument in this study, working to establish lineaments of similarity such as would provide reasonable grounds for placing the two domains in an analogical relationship. Having admitted that the two domains need not be exact replicas and on the basis of the likeness established, I have proceeded to apply the diaspora theoretical framework to the book of Esther with special focus on Esther 2:5–6. This I have done with the understanding that there is a close relationship between the community portrayed in the story and the one behind it. I leave this chapter having established that as is typical of diaspora communities, the community behind the book of Esther is a product of social construction with a self-understanding and attitude to Jewishness unique to itself.

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Conclusion

> How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?
> If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.
> If I do not remember you, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth;
> if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
>
> PSALMS 137:4–6

∴

The purpose of this study has been to explore reading Esther with a theory-nuanced understanding of diaspora as *the* heuristic framework. It is an exercise that developed from a suspicion of the adequacy of the connection between the story of Esther and the Purim festival, which has been the central interpretive key for more than a century.[1] The narrative of Jewish suffering, the horror of their landlessness and the several bursts of anti-Semitism throughout history, among other things, have kept alive an imagination of some kind of a yearning for a triumphant restoration. Therefore reading Esther as a tale serving as an aetiology for Purim would resonate with Herman Gunkel's theory when he traced the origins of the folktale to dreams and visions embodying 'some wish or other of primitive humankind; such "boulamatic [sic] folktales" depict as reality what in hard life could, of course, only remain an unattainable desire.'[2] Thus, despite protests in some Jewish circles for the most part of over two millennia,[3] Purim has commanded widespread recognition amongst the Jews.[4] Since the book of Esther is the liturgical text associated with the festival, the interpretive connection between the text and the festival has grown to become almost unassailable. The fact that both the festival's institution and the

1 In Chapter 1 I made reference to the works of Samuel R. Driver, Brevard Childs and Adele Berlin, spanning more than a century, in which the connection between Esther and Purim is given as central to reading the book. See S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* 9th edn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), 481; B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 599; and A. Berlin, *Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), ix.

2 H. Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 30.

3 J. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 8.

4 Barry Don Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 5.

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semantic concept of Purim are not mentioned anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible except in Esther[5] and that Esther 9 as a whole and particularly Purim's institutionalisation (Esther 9:18–31) can be read as a late interpolation,[6] render the value of that connection acutely inadequate for the purposes of interpreting the book. It is on that basis this study has proffered a theory-nuanced concept of diaspora as a more rewarding heuristic key in reading Esther than is the case with its connection with Purim.

The impetus for this study's centring the reading of Esther on the phenomenon of diaspora lies partly in the term's proliferation in both public and academic discourses in recent years.[7] The world seems to have suddenly awakened to the reality of 'mass population movements',[8] which at this point in time are topping socio-political rhetoric and rising to crisis proportions.[9] In Chapter 1 I discussed publications related to Esther studies whose titles include the word diaspora or devote sizeable sections to discussing the phenomenon. I noted of these publications that diaspora is used simply to mean living away from the centre, which is Eretz Israel. Where some distinctive usage of diaspora has been suggested, it has focused on extended exile, that is, when the time in exile has been long enough to 'graduate' into a diaspora.[10] The heuristic key for reading Esther has remained anchored to its obvious link with the Purim festival, a link that has been strengthened by the fact that to this day Jews use the book mainly in relation to the festival. To this end, Adele Berlin's observation sums it up well when she postulates that if it were not for that strong link Esther 'would languish in obscurity.'[11] This study has acknowledged the link and the interpretive work that has been carried out as useful contributions to understanding Esther. However, I departed from the norm first, by querying the adequacy of Purim as the central key in reading Esther and second, by looking to the phenomenon of diaspora as a more viable alternative.

In arguing for a theory-nuanced diaspora to be a more viable alternative than Purim, I have traced the etymology of the word diaspora to its agrarian roots in ancient Greece. The term has certainly been around for a very long time. The appropriation of the word's semantic essence in its usage in

5 The other insinuation of Purim can be found in extra-canonical traditions (2 Maccabees 15:36).

6 D. J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 26.

7 K. Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

8 K. Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

9 J. K. Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 19.

10 J. D. Levenson, Esther: A Commentary (London: SCM Press, 1997), 15–16.

11 A. Berlin, *Esther*, ix.

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the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible virtually took it out of the public domain. While the term retained its core element of scattering, the close association with יהוה-induced זעוה (horror or terror) as punishment for biblical Israel's disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:25) made the term a highly specialised concept. Diaspora (always in this sense capitalised) morphed to refer to a memory of a specific experience of a specific people. The memory of biblical Jews' diasporic experience became not only prototypical but also definitive of the term. As intimated in the introduction of this book, from as far back as Julius Welhausen[12] biblical scholars have recognised that 'all literature is to a large extent a reflection of the period in which it is written, and has been influenced by the circumstances in which the authors lived.'[13] The overt struggle of the author of Esther to link the community in the narrative with the early sixth century deportations following the Babylonian conquest[14] must be read as reflective of the struggles of the communities behind both the story and the book. With a theory-nuanced concept of diaspora firmly established as the central heuristic key for reading Esther, I will now try to sum up the gains of such a reading in keeping with the goals set out at the beginning of this study and others that may have arisen along the way.

1 Consideration of Dating Esther

Until now, I have deliberately chosen to defer a full discussion on dating Esther. This I did to allow first for a full exploration of the wide range of diasporic experiences without being limited to a particular era. I recall John Barton's observation in relation to the basic nature of folklore where he says: 'folk-tales are a great problem for any critic who wishes to argue that meaning always requires someone to mean it, for it is clear that most folk-tales have some kind of existence which transcends any given version of them.'[15] By attending to the nature of the process by which the book of Esther has come into being, this study has shown the massive wealth of prehistory behind the text, making

12 J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* trans. J. Sutherland Black and A. Menzies (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885), 318–319.

13 R. N. Whybray, R. N., *The Second Isaiah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 2.

14 In the Introduction of this study and I flagged the manner in which the author of Esther uses genealogy as one of the problems associated with this enterprise and I gave considerable treatment to the subject of genealogy in Chapter 2. I have shown that the material given in Esther 2:5–6 creates chronological challenges for the narrative.

15 J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1996), 114.

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its production more of a process than an event. Numerous scholars including Cazelles,[16] Hans Bardtke,[17] and Stephanie Dalley[18] have argued that it is hard to imagine a time when there was nothing about Esther in Jewish tradition. While certain elements of the story remained constant, the re-telling in Josephus and Targumim, the innovative interpretations of Esther in the medieval rabbinic traditions and the redefining of Esther's contents in the Reformation period are suggestive of 'a story still being written'. Asking for a date of publication of Esther seems to be the wrong question.

In Chapter 2 I made reference to the work of Józef T. Milik on the findings from Qumran, manuscript 4Q550 in which some badly fragmented texts have been read to represent an Aramaic version of what later became the story of Esther.[19] I have pointed out the challenges associated with Milik's reading of the archaeological evidence here. However, the possibility of an Aramaic translation of proto-Esther at Qumran lends support to the idea of the existence of some version of a Hebrew version of Esther long before the Common Era.[20] The author of Esther shows knowledge of Achaemenid Persian operational routine and etiquette, such that it is more reasonable to position the text within a close range of that empire in terms of time. This suggests that the author of Esther lived at a time when the Persian Empire had fallen only 'recently' and the memory of its strengths was still alive to provide a standard even for the new Greek administration. The satirical presentation of the 'powerful' Persian hegemony, in a sense, coheres with the likelihood that the Empire no longer commanded that much respect and had most likely already folded at the hands of Alexander the Great. I am opposed to the suggestion that Esther was written towards the end of the second century in order to accommodate the circumstances surrounding the Maccabean revolt[21] as I see that theory as too dependent on the assumption that the story is related to some event in history. Moreover, it is hard to believe that a Persian context would continue to

16 H. Cazelles, 'Note sur la Composition du Rouleau d'Esther' in H. Gross and F. Mussner, eds., *Lex tua veritus: Festschrift für Hubert Junger* (Trier: Paulinas Verlag,1961), 17–29.

17 H. Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther* Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), 248–252.

18 S. Dalley, *Esther's Revenge at Susa: From Sennacherib to Ahasuerus* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

19 G. Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 619.

20 Here I am reasoning from the standpoint that as is the case with other sections of the Bible, Aramaic texts developed from the Hebrew *Vorlage* in the linguistic developments that saw widespread usage of Aramaic in the place of Hebrew.

21 R. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948). 742.

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demand such attention two centuries after its demise. Writing of the Persian monarch with a mixture of reverence and satire would sit well within the first half of the first century of the Hellenistic period. Elements making up the story of Esther may have come from as far back as eighth century Assyrian mythology[22] and the story may have continued to be told and re-told way into the Common Era. However, on the basis of the intricate balance between an overt interest in Persian detail on the one hand and the 'has-been' kind of attitude to Persian hegemony on the other, I am persuaded to place some version of a completed story of Esther around 270 BCE.

2 Reconfiguring Diaspora Narratives in a Hellenistic Context

Building upon the emerging diaspora theory discussed in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 presented an analysis of the analogical domains central to this study, which has shown that diaspora narratives are products of social constructionist critiques. We have seen that beyond the geo-political reality of the homeland, the dynamics obtaining in host lands are pivotal in understanding diaspora narratives. In Chapter 3 I discussed the enthusiasm with which biblical Jews bought into the narrative of a Babylonian-Persian dichotomy. Given the naked disdain with which the dominant strand of biblical Israel viewed Babylon, the rise of Cyrus brought with it the prospect of removing Babylon's hold on power. In the memory of biblical Jews, Cyrus the Great and the Persian Empire represented the means by which יהוה had elected to restore Israel to her former glory:

> Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
> whose right hand I have grasped
> to subdue nations before him
> and strip kings of their robes,
> to open doors before him –
> and the gates shall not be closed.
> I will go before you
> and level the mountains,
> I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
> and cut through the bars of iron,
> I will give you the treasures of darkness
> and the riches hidden in secret places,

22 S. Dalley, *Esther's Revenge at Susa.*

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> so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
> the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
> For the sake of my servant Jacob,
> and Israel my chosen,
> I call you by name,
> I surname you, though you do not know me.
>
> ISAIAH 45:1–4

It is from this backdrop that Robert Gnuse remarked: 'From 550 onwards Deutero-Isaiah's prediction of the imminent fall of Babylon and his glorification of Cyrus as a great conqueror and as the deliverer of the Jews … would have seemed increasingly realistic.'[23] The achievements of Cyrus were perceived the all-time high, such that his successors struggled to reach the standard that he is remembered to have set. From about halfway through its history, with Artaxerxes' ascension as emperor in 465 BCE, the fall of the Persian Empire seemed inevitable. Peripheral territories started to grow away from central government and the key areas of Greece and Egypt became more problematic. The author of Esther, probably working shortly after the demise of Persia, must have been aware of the story of the declining fortunes and standards of the Persian Empire.

Closely associated with the promise of land to the patriarchs was the assurance of dominion over the whole world.[24] Hope for the realisation of that promise in the foreseeable future was resuscitated at Cyrus' rise, having been shattered at the occasion. As already referenced in this study, biblical Israel not only accorded Cyrus what Amélie Kuhrt referred to as 'a good press'[25] but also appropriated his memory into her own revival narrative (as argued in Chapter 3 above) is not at all surprising. The fall of the Persian Empire, following a sustained decline, readily confirmed the failure of the hope of restoration that Cyrus embodied over two centuries earlier. At this point in time it must have become clear for communities scattered across the known world which claimed Jewish ancestry that the idea of a restored Israel delivered through יהוה's elected Persian משיח (anointed one) or his progeny was a dead hope. This study concludes having established that Esther is a diaspora narrative reflecting the experience of mobilised communities struggling to make sense of the

23 R. Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants: The Biblical Assault on Kings and Kingship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 11–12.

24 N. Wazana, *All the Boundaries of the Land: The Promised Land in Biblical Thought in Light of the Ancient Near East* L. Qeren, trans. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 97–126.

25 A. Kuhrt, 'The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy' in *JSOT* 25 (1983) 83–97, 83.

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stark reality of the permanence of their situation. All hope is now extinct and a new story has to be told.

2.1 *Are All These Things Not Written in the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia?* (*Esther 10:2*)

For a narrative with as 'respectable' documentary sources as 'the annals of the kings of Media and Persia', one would expect some narrative congruence. In the Introduction of this study I flagged 'the problems with Esther', one of which has to do with the existence of several extant versions of the story. A theory-nuanced diaspora reading such as undertaken in this study helps to explain this problem, if not to resolve it entirely. It is not at all surprising that communities sharing in the memory of the same homeland, real or imagined, would share a repository of traditions. When reduced to its critical components (a bad queen who loses her royal place to a beautiful and unassuming young orphan; a loyal foreign and wise courtier who saves the king from an assassination plot by trusted kinsmen; the ever presence of a more powerful but evil official who uses deceit to work towards inflicting despicable harm on the hero/heroine of the narrative) – these are the building blocks of the story that one would expect to find in 'the annals of the kings of Media and Persia'. How the story is developed depends on the specific diasporic conditions of the community behind each respective version. In the analogy used in this study, I have emphasised the multiplicity of identities of the modern day 'Zimbabwean diaspora' as argued by Dominic Pasura.[26] The Zimbabwean diaspora community in the United Kingdom may share a repository of traditions about homeland but they will always weave these into different narrative versions depending on where they stand – documented or undocumented, male or female, young or old, location in the United Kingdom, professional/academic qualifications, and so on. It becomes even more complicated when consideration is given to how the same repository of traditions is being developed by Zimbabwean diaspora communities in South Africa, Australasia, the United States of America and anywhere else on the globe.

26 D. Pasura, *African Transnational Diasporas: Fractured Communities of Zimbabweans in Britain*. Migration Diasporas and Citizenship Series. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

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2.2 *How Shall We Sing the LORD's Song in a Foreign Land?* (*Psalm 137:4*)

The lyrical line comes from a Psalm that predates Esther by more than two and a half centuries.[27] It is used here to show that right from the beginning, the memory of diaspora in relation to the vicissitudes of the fortunes of the host lands necessitated reconfiguration of the narrative 'as told so far'. After 330 BCE the יהוה who guaranteed restoration of Israel by use of the Persian Cyrus as his משיח would need to be saved from the mess of failed hopes. In the tradition descending down to the B Text of Esther, saving יהוה would require that he would burst forth in dreams and in the prayers of the faithful protagonists like in the times of old and take a decisive role in the narrative. It is possible to speculate that this tradition is to be located in Alexandria and the western diaspora where there must have been a vibrant memory of יהוה of the Exodus who 'brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders …' (Deuteronomy 26:8). For the tradition descending down to the Masoretic Text version of Esther יהוה would be God only by remaining in the background in this narrative, leaving the deity's role only assumed in the numerous coincidences characterising the narrative. I may suggest that this is likely to have developed in Babylonia and the eastern diaspora. The consciousness of the story's ancient Assyrian background would have caused considerable discomfort in making יהוה part of a narrative drawing from myths about other gods and ineffective kings.

2.3 *For He Had Told Them That He Was a Jew* (*Esther 3:4*)

I grew up in the high-density suburbs of Harare in Zimbabwe where it was not unusual for the very frequent domestic altercations to spill into the streets for the amusement of entire neighbourhoods. Most male adults, the sole breadwinners in the traditional setting, were employed as unskilled labourers in the local industries and were paid their wages weekly (unlike skilled workers and civil servants who had respectable employment contracts and higher earnings who would be paid monthly). Fridays were popularly known as '*Hoza m'phelavhiki*' (literally 'welcome weekend'), and the neighbourhood would become alive as families could afford special meals and the men could sneak out for a drink with friends at their local pub. The irresponsible ones would leave their workplaces with their pay-envelopes and head straight to their favourite

27 Dating poetic texts is a difficult thing to do. There seems to be a consensus that Psalm 137 must be placed during the Babylonian exile with some scholars preferring a date just after 597 BCE but not later than 587 BCE on account of its silence on the destruction of Jerusalem. For a fuller discussion on this Psalm see Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Eric Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150* Linda M. Maloney, trans. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 523–524.

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pub, often losing all their earnings to thieves or prostitutes. In one particular case, as it got late into the night, the wife would know that it was going to be another week of unpaid bills and little or no essential supplies for the family. I have vivid memories of waking up late at night to the sounds of a man banging on his door after returning from the pub to find that the angry wife had locked him out. I remember the words (sharper in my vernacular): 'Woman, open up this door right now, I am the man of this house!' I have grown up knowing that there is always something wrong for someone to state the obvious! In this case the man knew that in a single salary household, he had failed his wife and children. Barking over the entire neighbourhood that he was 'the man of the house' was more for himself as nobody cared. While this example, being a Zimbabwean in Zimbabwe, may read as lacking in the diaspora element, it must be noted that the country's internal geo-political dynamics in the 1970s were characterised by massive rural-to-urban migration. The community from which this example is drawn shared in the diasporic sense of up-rootedness as it thrived in the poor urban townships having been forced to leave their rural homes in search for employment and a better life. It was also a time when rural area were considered extremely unsafe on account of the protracted armed struggle against colonial rule. In a sense, it was a diaspora community indeed. For Mordecai to state that he was a Jew, endangering all other Jews, and the general emphasis of being יהודי in Esther, suggests that there must have been reason to question the Jewishness of this community in the first place. I have here drawn from the analysis of the Zimbabwean analogy that people living in diaspora are characteristically insecure about their identity; they may need to shout it out if not to others then at least to themselves.

3 Summary of Findings

I set out to explore the place of a theory-nuanced concept of diaspora in reading Esther, drawing on such themes as empire, transnationalism, monarchy and hegemony. I have proposed a reading of the story of Esther that learns from the gains of modern day diaspora studies, seeking an understanding of the book that proceeds from what is arguably its primary concern. It has been shown that much of the Esther studies discourse tends to hold as a predominant view that the story of Esther (in its various versions) is a work of fiction that came into being around the later part of the second century as an aetiology to explain the origins of the Purim festival. This project was borne out of a suspicion about the adequacy of such a reading, a suspicion shared by only a few other voices in the discourse. In the work of David J. A. Clines, Stephanie

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Dalley and Helen Jacobus I have found company in exploring the possibility of a heuristic key to the story of Esther beyond the notion of Purim aetiology. I have critiqued the alternatives proffered by my protagonists in the summative discussion of their work above.[28]

It is in the wake of the foregoing that I have offered a theory-nuanced understanding of diaspora as an alternative heuristic key to the reading of Esther. Focusing particularly on Masoretic Text Esther 2:5–7, I have used the somewhat skeletal genealogical material provided here to form the basis upon which the quest for the community behind the story of Esther has been pursued and linked with the Jewish diaspora, referred to as the prototypical diaspora in the academic field of diaspora studies. By using the modern Zimbabwean 'diaspora' in the United Kingdom as an analogical referent, I have demonstrated how diaspora functions as a reality central to a community's self-understanding and to the way that community will construct narratives. It is fitting and indeed inevitable that hermeneutic engagements with literary legacies of diaspora communities must use diasporic categories. The Esther story is no exception.

4 So What?

My interest in exploring a reading of the book of Esther with a theory-nuanced concept of diaspora as the central heuristic key is directly related to my social location as a Zimbabwean migrant living in the United Kingdom. When the opportunity to pursue a research programme became available, I decided to explore how the feeling of 'uprootedness' (characteristic of biblical Israel) would have impacted on the formation and reading of biblical texts. The book of Esther became a natural choice as a text of primary focus because of its admitted diaspora context. The study has shown that employment of a theory-nuanced understanding of the concept of diaspora offers a new dimension to reading biblical texts. That the biblical texts are products of real communities is beyond dispute. Given that biblical Israel did not sustain continuous hold on any piece of land and that many of her people lived outside Eretz Israel, the bulk of what we have received as the Hebrew Bible must have come into being in away-from-the-centre contexts. With particular reference to the story of Esther, the thesis demonstrates that the concept of diaspora is not only the setting of the story but also its central heuristic key. On a general plane,

28 See also T. K. Mapfeka, 'Esther 9 Through the Lens of Diaspora: The Exegetical and Ethical Dilemmas of the Massacres in Susa and Beyond' in J. van Ruiten, ed., *Violence in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, Forthcoming).

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this thesis challenges the presupposition of a centralised Jerusalem based scribal cartel as the dominant producer of literature on biblical Israel, foregrounding contribution of diaspora Jews in the formation of biblical Israel's communal memory.

5 Looking beyond This Study

As intimated in the Introduction of this study, the project will present some outstanding issues as areas that would reward further inquiry. This study has managed to place a theory-nuanced diaspora as the more viable framework in reading Esther than its link to Purim as is often assumed. It can be argued that the entire Bible is put together from a diasporic point of view if consideration is given to the Christian teaching popularised by such poetic expressions as Jim Reeves' (1923–1964)[29] hit song:

> This world is not my home
> I'm just a-passing through
> My treasures are laid up
> Somewhere beyond the blue

The whole Bible in the broad sense of scriptural tradition came together from the background of diaspora. In looking beyond my doctoral studies, two things stand out. In the first instance, as shown here, I hope to see how a theory-nuanced diaspora reading could be applicable to other sections of the Bible.

Second, I intend to explore how that kind of reading may reward attending to the multiplicity of identities and salient relationships that characterise diasporic spaces. The question of gender has always represented one such complex dynamic. Applying the same theory-nuanced diaspora reading developed in this study, I propose looking at a gendered analysis of sexual expediency in diasporic spaces, paying particular attention to imperial and other processes of negotiating power. The present study has emphasised the multiplicity of identities in diasporic spaces and the tendency of some dominant voice to offer their own narrative as all there is to the experience of the mobilised diaspora community. Almost always, the narrative that survives is that of the elite and powerful. The stories of those who lie at the bottom of the power chain will be ignored completely or, at best, twisted to ensure maintenance of the

29 J. W. Rumble, 'Jim Reeves' in P. Kingsbury, M. McCall and J. W. Rumble, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 435–436.

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status quo. Yet, as this study has shown, the decisive sacrifices in shaping the consequent narrative are not necessarily at the cost of those who live to tell the tale. Here the perennial question of gender inequality rears its head once again.[30] When the story of Esther is told the reader learns that at the end of it all: 'Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced' (Esther 8:15). Even when consideration is given to the institution of Purim and beyond, it is Mordecai who stands out and it is his 'power and might' that find space 'in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia' as he now was 'next to the king' (Esther 10:2–3). As already referred to above, it is not at all surprising that the memory of Purim turned to 'the day of Mordecai' (2 Maccabees 15:36). Yet if sacrifice could be quantified, Esther's far outweighs that of Mordecai. While this may be a subject that has already attracted feminist/womanist readings, my approach is essentially diasporic. The textual disparity in two of the most popular extant versions of Esther offers a critical cue for my first question. In the Greek B Text rendition of Mordecai bringing up Esther as *gunaika* (wife)[31] I sense a replay of traditions reminiscent of patriarchal experiences as fixed in Genesis 12, 20 and 26; where women are called upon to make the biggest sacrifices with the men living to reap all the benefits.

30 A. Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* 2nd edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 31–32.

31 This is a matter that has been given only a concise treatment in the present study and would be pursued in greater detail in studies anticipated beyond this project.

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